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**What Does It Mean to Be Gay in American Consumer Culture?**

**Gay Advertising and Gay Consumers: A Cultural Studies Perspective**

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# What Does It Mean to Be Gay in American Consumer Culture?

# Gay Advertising and Gay Consumers: A Cultural Studies Perspective

**by**

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Fu-Mei Wang and Ming-Zen Tsai, and my partner, Ching-Hua Chuan.

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# What Does It Mean to Be Gay in American Consumer Culture?

# Gay Advertising and Gay Consumers: A Cultural Studies Perspective

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This dissertation investigates how mainstream television commercials in the United States represent gay men, lesbians, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people and how GLBT-identified consumers evaluate those portrayals. Encountering a scarcity of research on gay advertising, queer audience, and GLBT consumers, this dissertation constitutes an early step in understanding how sexual and gender minorities interact with ambiguous gay window and explicit out-of-closet commercials. It also adds new angles to the study of sexuality, gender, race and class through the perspectives of bisexuality and transgenderism to bring the taken-for-granted cultural system of binary thinking into question. The main objective of the analysis is to see how the identity categories of sexuality, gender, race, and class, as well as individual interests, experiences, and political affiliations are enacted in advertising and in queer audiences' interpretive narratives. The research is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework of consumer culture theory, audience reception theory, cultural studies, and critical studies.

In particular, Hall's encoding/decoding model serves as the theoretical framework of analyzing GLBT audiences' interpretive narratives. The general observation is that most participants welcomed the development of gay marketing and advertising. They critically evaluated the text images for stereotypical or positive representations but did not evaluate the capitalist construction of gay niche market or the class-dividing implication of the dream consumer stereotype. The awareness of being a social minority outside of the mainstream society permeated their readings of gay advertising texts. The shared middle-class position or aspiration emerged as a crucial unifying factor over race, gender, age, and religion in their attitudes toward gay advertising and gay marketing in general. Participants perceived advertising as a mighty cultural institution in the capitalist American society. Thus, advertising becomes a legitimate discourse for participants to contest their own situation in the GLBT community and in the American society at large. Gay window commercials were viewed as compatible with the history of queer invisibility and understood in relation to their closeted experience. Out-of-closet commercials that offer clearly recognizable GLBT images were interpreted in a comparative framework of "what we really are" and "how we are seen by the mainstream society."

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

In the early twenty-first century, we witnessed the emergence of a wealth of GLBT representations in popular literary, film, television and music products. What was once a stigmatized gay culture has been incorporated into the mainstream and transformed through commercialization (Harris 1999). The gay niche market that emerged in the United States in the 1990s (Kates 1997; Chasin 2000) has also gone through dramatic changes, contributing to the commercialization of queerness. For many participants and contributors of the gay niche market, the cumulative marketing efforts catering to the gays as well as the increasing gay men, lesbians, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) images in mainstream advertising are themselves a sign of progress, if not a success. However, the early excitement of being recognized by mainstream marketers has grown into a more skeptical and critical attitude as the gay niche market fledges. Many scholars and GLBT activists have shown concerns about the circulation of a narrow version of gay visibility in mass media (Peñaloza 1996; Reichert et al. 1999; Ciasullo 2001; Chasin 2000; Sender 2004).

In sharp contrast to the proliferation of claims and hypes about the gay niche market in marketing and advertising trade discourses, research concerning gay consumers in advertising and marketing academia remains relatively rare. Only recently have gay consumers gained some research attention. In particular, Steven Kates pioneers the research subject of gay male consumer behavior by investigating the role of gay-themed

products and gay-friendly brands in community-building (Kates 2000), gay men's subcultural consumption of products in the context of an urban gay ghetto (Kates 2002a), and gay consumers' conspicuous consumption behaviors during special events like the Pride Day (Kates and Belk 2001). A few other studies have explored gay male consumers' gift-giving consumption rituals (Rucker, Freitas, and Huidor 1996; Newman and Nelson 1996) and gay men's fashion consumption that carries substantial meanings of style, self-presentation, and their perceptions of desirability of social interaction (Freitas, Kaiser and Hammidi 1996). Other media scholars have explored gay audiences' reading strategies of gay vague advertising texts (Sender 1999; Grier and Brumbaugh 1999), and attitudes towards advertising and media usage (Burnett 2000). In particular, Peñaloza's (1996) insightful essay on marketing's construction of the lesbian and gay market warned us of the skewed marketing perspective of gay and lesbian "lifestyle" and culture, and called for more serious critical attention. However, previous research efforts disproportionately focused on gay male consumers since they are the primary target of contemporary gay marketing. Lesbian consumers, along with other members of the broader queer community, such as bisexual and transgender people, are further neglected by marketers as well as academic scholars.

The past twenty years of consumer research have produced a substantial body of research addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, ideological and political aspects of consumption. However, marginalized and stigmatized consumer groups, such as the GLBT community, have not been thoroughly studied with regards to the important issues, such as self-concept dynamics (Belk 1988; Schouten 1991; Arnold and Thompson

2005) and multi-dimensional subcultural consumption (Peñaloza 1994; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Kates 2000), even though the disenfranchised minority group may be relatively sensitive and susceptible to marketing and advertising enticements from the mainstream.

Consumer culture theory (Arnold and Thompson 2005) that emphasizes the negotiated and productive aspect of consumption constitutes the pertinent theoretical framework to understand GLBT consumers' subcultural consumption of mainstream brands and advertising texts in relation to their multilayer identity factors, personal history, and value systems. Consumer culture theory explores how consumers actively rework and transform symbolic meanings through their negotiations with marketing communications, retail settings, or commodities to suit their personal experiences, identity project, and social circumstances, and to further their identity and lifestyle goals (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Mick and Buhl 1992; Peñaloza 2000; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Scott 1994).

Furthermore, while research topics regarding the critical role of consumption of products in subcultural formation and boundary maintenance (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Kozinets 2001; Kates 2002a) have been explored, the subcultural consumption of marketing communication texts, such as advertising, has just begun. This dissertation aims to further a growing stream of interpretive literature in consumer research that explores the ways that consumers interpret marketing communications according to their personal, social, and cultural circumstances (Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999; Mick and Buhl 1992; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Scott 1994). In particular, Kates

(2002) advances the theoretical construct of interpretive communities in consumer research as an alternative form of lifestyle market segmentation. He argues that consumers' various interpretations of brand meanings and marketing communications may constitute interpretive communities based on their interpretive strategies. To examine Kates' theorization of interpretive communities in consumer culture research, this dissertation pays special attention to gay consumers' reading of gay window advertising, the most common strategy targeting gay and lesbian consumers by using implicit and coded gay subtexts. The reading of the malleable gay window advertising by GLBT consumers, in relation to their cultural capital of the queer subculture, strength of identification with the queer community and gay rights politics, along with other identity factors, such as gender, social class, and ethnicity, illuminates "the subjectivity of ad experiences within the boundaries of the ad's sign structure and denotative content" (Mick and Buhl 1992, p. 317).

With regards to gay images in mass media, a variety of representations of GLBT people have popped up relentlessly, generating fervent debates within the community over the effects of certain queer images on the gay rights movements and gay people's self-identity (Chasin 2000; Sender 2004; Ciasullo 2001). Whereas some studies examining gay images in films, science fiction, and the news have been done (Dyer 1984, 1993; Harrington 2003; Jenkins 1995; Alwood 1996), studies about representations of GLBT people in the media landscape of mainstream advertising have not gained fair attention. Previous advertising research has examined only a few types of gay representations, such as gay male stereotypes (Tsai 2004) and the recent public

fascination with lesbian chic images (Reichert et al. 1999; Reichert 2001). A comprehensive analysis of various types of advertising representations of not only gay men and lesbians, but also bisexual and transgender people is thus imperative to illuminate the media construction of the broader concept of queerness.

Advertising research has yet to fully explore gay consumers' interpretations and responses to advertising catering to them, especially in the contexts of their identity-formation and maintenance, interpersonal relationship, and community construction. From a theoretical perspective, advertising texts are largely framed within the stimulus-effect model in which a researcher carefully constructs a number of advertising stimuli, and according to an experimental design, displays the ads to a sample of individuals to test a number of theory-based hypotheses. Over the years, the "advertising as information" paradigm has made great contributions to consumer research, as shown by the extensive body of knowledge developed in the field. However, as highlighted by Scott (1994), "models of processing that attribute control to the advertiser, constrain the objectives of the reading experience to brand processing, and define the consumer's primary task in terms that privilege the interests of the advertiser, and disempower the consumer to a degree that is unrealistic and undesirable" (p. 477). As a consequence of treating advertising texts as marketing stimuli rather than cultural texts, consumers' reading and consumption of advertisements, especially in terms of their contextualized meaning-making and social use of advertising texts, has not been sufficiently studied in consumer culture research.

Theorists suggest that the mass media may satisfy needs relating to personal identity and relationships (O'Donohoe 1994), and more importantly, media have been cited as the most important contemporary factor in the socialization of gay men and lesbians (Hicks 2002). Studies examining GLBT consumers' social use of advertising within the context of interpersonal interaction are critical for understanding the role advertising plays in minority consumers' lives. Specifically, scholars have indicated that advertising can be experienced outside the medium in which it is conventionally viewed (Alperstein 1990; Ritson and Elliot 1999) and enjoyed independent of the product marketed (Willis 1990; Nava 1992). Hence, this dissertation explores gay consumers' use of gay advertising texts for non-purchase based, socially oriented reasons, fantasist-escapist needs (McQuail et al. 1972), for communal ties, and as tokens in social exchanges (Willis 1990) in order to contribute to a better understanding of what consumers do with advertising (O'Donohoe 1994).

This dissertation complements and extends existing work on gay marketing and queer readings, including Chasin's (2000) *Selling Out*, Sender's (2004) *Business, Not Politics: the Making of the Gay Market*, Bronski's (1984) *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sexuality*, and Doty's (1991) *Making Things Perfectly Queer*. Research on advertising audience has to consider the nexus of the dual social roles of consumer and audience. Thus this dissertation is situated within two broad and interdisciplinary research paradigms, consumer culture theory and reception theory, to achieve a more holistic understanding of the dialogic relationships between gay advertising and GLBT consumers through a cultural studies approach. On researching gay consumer culture,

Peñaloza (1996) states that “it is necessary to move beyond identity but to include also social practices and community formations in conceptualizing gay consumer culture” (p.22), especially concerning the fact that gay men, lesbians, and bisexual people vary in the degree to which they prioritize their sexual identity and their identification with the community and with the political beliefs anchored in contemporary gay rights movements. This conceptualization of gay consumer culture that encompasses the multiple dimensions of identity, social practices, and community formation contribute to a more sensitive and comprehensive understanding of GLBT consumers’ diverse meanings-making of products, services, and marketing communications.

This work is inspired by ethnography in which the goal is “to enter relatively small life-worlds and examine how large-scale social forces work themselves out in everyday life” (Ortner 1993, p.413). This dissertation aims to address how GLBT consumers construct and manage their sexual identity, social practices, and community formations as they interact with the gender and sexual discourses available in the mediated advertising and marketing discourses. Implications of gay marketing discourses with respect to the structure of the U.S. marketplace, to individual GLBT consumers, and to the queer community are critically evaluated.

This dissertation approaches queer representation, queer spectatorship, and queer consumer culture from a variety of angles. A comprehensive textual analysis of gay male, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender representations in mainstream advertising first clarifies the contradictions of the media text’s mixed attempts, as well as some of the dilemmas of gay and lesbian representations in mass media as a whole. The second part is concerned

with queer spectatorship by identifying patterns in GLBT audiences' readings of mainstream advertising texts, while focusing on audiences' identification position and meaning-making.

The research is located within the cultural studies perspective that assumes an intertwined relationship between the production and reproduction of symbolic meanings and actualized meanings. From a cultural studies perspective, I simultaneously embrace the study of gay representations in mainstream television commercials and gay audiences' evaluation of these portrayals. Using a multi-methodological approach, I investigate how the mainstream television commercials represent gay men, lesbians, bisexual, and transgender people and how GLBT audiences perceive, interpret and negotiate these representations. This study also aims to explore the intersections of gender, race, and class that are embedded in television advertising, as well as in GLBT consumers' identity narratives.

For the scope of this dissertation, only the television commercials from network television and made by mainstream advertisers were reviewed in the textual analysis and were shown to queer-identified participants in the audience reception study. This study concerns the representations of GLBT people in mass media, rather than gay images in the gay-oriented press and those produced by gay rights organizations and gay-owned businesses, since ads made by the latter are often aired only in certain metropolitan areas such as New York and San Francisco. Gay images in mass media have a crucial impact on gay people's self identity, especially for people living outside of gay ghettos where gay publications are not always available. Additionally, the portrayals of GLBT people in

mass media have the most significant impacts on the societal attitudes towards GLBT people, particularly for those who have little contact with the gay community.

The audience reception study is situated in the local GLBT community in Austin, Texas, including queer student groups of the University of Texas at Austin. The study aims to capture the diverse voices from the local queer community. GLBT participants of various backgrounds of ethnicity, age, and profession were recruited.

The language referring to queer versus gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) in this dissertation is complicated with the ongoing discursive contestation of queerness. When I try to be as clear and coherent as possible, the complexity and volatility of identity and meaning-making of cultural texts has made naming, labeling, and determining queerness difficult. In general, I use gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) to indicate the specificity of the issue discussed. In contrast, queer or queerness refers to concepts that are ideologically different from GLBT. It is used in this dissertation more than an inclusive umbrella term, but in a way that is similar to Queer Nation's assertion of queerness as ideologically and politically different from gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender assimilationism. To identify as a queer means to be culturally radical and politically confrontational. Queerness is also used in this dissertation to describe sensibility that is beyond the discursive confines of GLBT. Doty (1993) explains that the term queer describes "those aspects of spectatorship, cultural readership, production, and textual coding that seem to establish spaces not described by, or contained within, straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, or transgendered understandings and categorizations of gender and sexuality (p. 6)." Hence, my

conception of queerness in this dissertation refers to reading positions that are not limited by binary thinking or by one's sexual and gender identities. In this way, the elusive nature of queerness is emphasized to challenge essentialized categories.

The term "subculture" is equally contested and politics-laden. Subculture has been conceptualized to describe the complexity, pluralism, and diversity within societies to explain the emergence of alternative meaning systems in a way that is similar to multiculturalism. However, recent theorization of subcultures, especially that of punks and youth subcultures, conceptualizes subcultures within a more radical and subversive framework, arguing that subcultures emerge as a form of resistance to dominant social structures. I acknowledge the resistant potential of the subcultures of minority groups since the configuration of minority subcultures often is implicated with their oppressed experience. However, the current cultural construction of GLBT communities examined in this dissertation indicates that assimilation and commercialization has become powerful forces in integrating queer subcultures into the dominant culture while at the same time diluting the potential radical politics. Therefore, subculture in this dissertation refers to a general conceptualization of non-dominant culture.

**Outline of Chapters**

In order to achieve a more holistic understanding of the dual position of advertising audiences/consumers, a discussion on advertising and consumer culture in the U.S. society first illuminates the significance of the role of consumption in our everyday lives. A historical review of the emergence of gay niche market and gay advertising in

the 1990s provides the socio-historic context in which this dissertation is situated. Both subjects are covered in the first part of Chapter II.

Theoretically, the study is built on the convergence and interaction of three areas of research: identity theory, consumer culture theory, and audience reception theory. The discussions of these three perspectives in relation to this dissertation are the main concern of the second part of Chapter II on theoretical frameworks. This framework helps to answer to the following questions: How are lesbians, gay men, bisexual, and transgender people commonly presented in television commercials? Why is it important that we study these representations? What is the relationship between gay advertising and GLBT audience? And, how does the particular combination of approaches proposed here help us understand gay images and GLBT audiences' interpretations of them?

In Chapter III on research approaches, I present the methodologies for the textual analysis of GLBT-referenced television commercials and the research design for the gay audience reception study. In this section, I draw on the discussion of gay advertising and marketing and explain the research questions in the textual ideological analysis of television commercials. I also describe the interview process, the analysis of the transcripts, and the interpretation and writing process for the audience reception study. Issues of validity and generalization in qualitative research and the importance of triangulation are discussed in the later part of this section.

Finally, I discuss the dialogical analysis that ties the textual analysis and the reception study together. While the textual analysis illuminates the dominant marketing ideologies embedded in advertising texts and suggests the preferred or dominant reading,

the audience reception theory examines audiences' actualized interpretations of the texts through dominant, negotiated, or oppositional interpreting strategies. The textual analysis demonstrates through what elements, tactics, and iconography that the advertising texts can work to predispose audiences' reading positions. In particular, the reception study investigates how audiences' various identity factors and the social and cultural contexts of consumers affect their choice of reading strategies.

The textual analysis of GLBT-targeted commercials is presented in Chapter IV. Gay advertisements are defined in this paper as the ads that are designed to *include or target gay consumers* by carrying implicit or explicit gay references—from vaguely implying same-sex bonding, to explicitly showing self-identified gay characters—and by depicting erotic desire and affection for or between characters of the same sex. The main objective of this chapter is to identify gay advertising's privileged gender, race, and class ideologies and the strategies that demonstrate them, by analyzing which group(s) from the diverse queer community gets to be shown, and how they are shown.

Data collected from the reception study are presented and discussed in Chapter V. The patterns, themes, key issues observed in participants' identity narratives and interpretations of gay advertising texts are thematically presented and integrated with the results drawn from the textual analysis. Participants' selection of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional interpretation strategies are analyzed in relation to the social and personal identity factors that affect their reading strategies. In particular, I pay special attention to the dominant ideologies, such as capitalism, citizenship, and assimilation

discourses, that influence participants' readings of gay advertising texts, by highlighting the often ignored social and political dimension of consuming advertising.

At last, in Chapter VI, the concluding chapter, the results drawn from the textual analysis and the respondent interviews are situated back into the theoretical framework of consumer culture theory and audience reception theory. In the final section, theoretical implication, reflexivity, and suggestions for future research are presented.

# CHAPTER II

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, advertising and consumer culture in the U.S. society and a historical review of the emergence of gay niche market and gay advertising are presented in the study background section.

The interdisciplinary theoretical framework of this dissertation that is based on identity theory from the field of psychology, consumer culture theory of consumer research, and audience reception theory from media studies is discussed in the later part of this chapter.

## STUDY BACKGROUND

In this section, literature on advertising and consumer culture in the US and its relation to the construction of a modern gay identity are reviewed. The historical review of gay advertising and gay marketing is provided in the later part of this section.

### Advertising and Consumer Culture in the U.S.

Various theorists have argued that consumption has long been central to American identity, culture, economic development, citizenship, and politics. Consumer culture, a phenomenon emerging alongside mass production in the 1920s (Ewen 1976), has been heavily theorized and investigated. Traditional views on consumer culture predominantly circulated around the critique of “consumerism” which is a term used to

describe the effects of equating personal happiness with the purchase of material possessions and consumption. In contrast to the cold war official discourse that tended to celebrate “consumption and capitalism as the hallmark of the free world” (Glickman 1999, p.8), scholars had denigrated consumer culture for producing robotic conformity and for fetishizing material goods.

In a related vein, many critics have charged advertising as responsible for turning products into fetishes and aggrandizing consumerism. It is generally argued that capitalist consumption is characterized by irrationality as the symbolic system of meanings that are associated with goods through marketing communications like advertising appears to be highly arbitrary. In particular, historian Stuart Ewen (1976) calls attention to a transition period in the 1920s when advertising messages shifted from product information to a focus on defining consumers. Stuart Hall (1977) also argues that the main trend in modern advertising shows a move away from the presentation of information and towards persuasion through endorsing certain symbolic meanings associated with commodities, and as such, advertising today has both an economic and a cultural function.

It was in the 1970s and 1980s that scholars began to look anew at the meaning of consumption and how it is interwoven with people’s lived experiences (Glickman 1999), broadening the domain of inquiry beyond mass culture and commercial leisure. Consumer behaviors are historically, socially, and culturally contextualized and studies of consumer culture now extend from discourse of the middle-class mainstream to the examination of working-class families (Cohen1989), labor ideology and practice (Greenburg 1997), immigrant life (Heinze 1990), gender construction (Swiencicki 1998),

political activism (Weems 1994), and many other aspects of societies that for a long time had seemed far removed from consumer culture.

Within the new stream of consumer culture research, the term "consumer culture" conceptualizes an interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that consumers use, enjoy, incorporate, transform and identify with, to make sense of their everyday surroundings and to direct identity projects (Kozinets 2001). In this perspective, consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and "between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets" (Arnold and Thompson 2004, p. 869). These meanings move from the "culturally constituted world to consumer goods and then…to the individual consumer" (McCracken 1986, p.71) and then are embodied and negotiated by consumers in particular situations, social roles, and relationships. As Holt (2002) suggests, the consumption of mass-produced commodities and desire-inducing marketing symbols is central to consumer culture. Scholars thus argue that through marketing ideologies about commodities, consumer culture often works in a similar way to cultural traditions to provide blueprints for personal and social identity (Arnold and Thompson 2005), informing consumers as to who one is, where one belongs, and to what one should aspire to become in life.

Furthermore, the socio-political dimension of marketplace and consumption has been noted, especially in relation to minority consumer groups and social movements. In consumer culture research, the symbolic nature of consumers' consumption behavior defines the consumer and reflects the social, political, and cultural contexts of the

individual. Scholars have also argued that many civil rights gains were manifested in the marketplace, exemplified by disenfranchised groups' access to services, products, and resources (Peñaloza 1996; Chasin 2000). Peñaloza (1999) offers us the additional insight of the political dimension of consumption and marketplace by discussing group consciousness as the grounds of the modern gay niche market.

> As members of a social movement, gays and lesbians have developed a consciousness of themselves as a people as the result of history of common interests and experiences, particularly their exclusion, mobilization, and struggle in response to how they have been treated by others. This consciousness is …part of the foundation for the gay/lesbian market segment…(1999, p.22)

In this sense, consumption and marketplace are considered as important domains of social contestation in which marginalized groups engage in ongoing struggles for social and political incorporation. Marketing activities and communications that employ elements from the certain group identity and experience may have substantial impacts to members of marginalized communities, since they constitute a public resource that is not conventionally available and accessible. For example, Peñaloza (1999) points out that social validation and legitimation are experienced by gays and lesbians as a result of public and market accommodation. In this sense, marketing can be seen as a cultural institution which may shape (promote or inhibit) social changes.

The influential role of advertising in consumer culture has been well documented. In his influential book *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, Stuart Ewen (1976) offers a historical look at the origins of the advertising industry and its relation to consumer society at the turn of the twentieth century. McCracken (1986) also indicated that advertising is a "conduit through which

meaning constantly pours from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods" (p.76); it serves as a lexicon of current cultural meanings to be circulated in consumer culture.

Scholars thus argue that advertising, the manifestation and driving force of consumer culture, has become one of the greatest vehicles of social communication in "market-industrial societies" like the United States (Leiss et al. 1990). Advertising messages reach deeply into our most critical and personal concerns: interpersonal and family relations, sense of happiness, gender roles and stereotyping, cultural traditions, and more importantly, self-identity. As Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1990) suggested,

> Advertising is not just a business expenditure undertaken in the hope of moving some merchandise off the store shelves, but is rather an integral part of modern culture. Its creations appropriate and transform a vast range of symbols and ideas. Its unsurpassed communicative powers recycle cultural models and references back through the networks of social interactions. This venture is unified by the discourse through and about objects, which bonds together images of persons, products, and well-being. (p.5)

At the individual level, advertising discourse is present in the most personal setting in our lives. It is the privileged, glamorized, and mass-consumed discourse for the circulation of various values and social ideologies affecting the relationships between consumers and products. Scholars have further argued that communications among individuals, in which people send signals to others about their attitudes, expectations, and sense of identity, are strongly associated with and expressed through patterns of preferences for consumer goods (Newman et al. 1996), a phenomenon reflective of the modern consumer culture.

Advertising, as a powerful force and strategy of modern capitalism, reflects and enhances the negotiations within the free market and between various social groups. For example, the advertising industry as a media institution witnesses the conflicts and negotiations between profit demand and potentially contradictory social values and gay politics. More importantly, advertising as a negotiated discourse opens up possibilities for social minorities such as lesbians and gay men to gain and exercise (economic) power in the marketplace and in commercial media, as "cultural forms are sites in which different subjectivities struggle to impose or challenge, to confirm, negotiate or displace, definitions and identities" (Gledhill 1988, p. 72).

## The Rise of the Gay Niche Market and Gay Advertising

### *Capitalism, Gay Identity and the Identity-Based Consumer Segmentation Strategy*

Scholars have indicated that the modern gay "identity" is a sociohistoric construction. In his essay "Capitalism and Gay Identity," historian John D'Emilio (1983) argues that there was no lesbian or gay identity or subculture, which is different from homosexual behaviors, until the development of capitalism in the nineteenth century. D'Emilio argues that capitalism required a system of labor based on individual wages, rather than on self-sufficient household or slavery, and wages gave individuals a relative autonomy, the necessary material condition of the formation of a homosexual identity and culture. D'Emilio explains that the economic autonomy made possible for homosexual desires to coalesce into a personal identity since it is an identity "based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based

on attraction to one's own sex" (p. 470). In his book *Sexual Citizenship* (1993), Evans similarly suggests that capitalism in the United States has made the formation of a gay identity and a gay community possible.

In a relevant vein, marketing ideologies and consumer culture in the capitalist American society contribute to the construction of the gay market that emerged in the 1980s and developed in the 1990s. Niche marketing has a long history that can be traced back to the 1920s when teenagers were targeted as a lucrative market (Schrum 2006). Yet, since the mid-1960s, the mass market has been increasingly segmented into various niche markets (Peñaloza 1996), resulting from heated competition within the mass market, the increasing heterogeneity of the consumer demographics, and the availability of specialized media products. Based on consumer segmentation strategies, advertisers like Disney were able to become aware of the concept of the gay market (Griffin 1998).

Scholars have argued that the rise of the gay niche market and related gay advertising are closely intertwined with the niche marketing strategy based on identity differentiation and the development of consumer culture in the United States. An implicit assumption in the proliferated discourse about the gay niche market is that people consume on the basis of their identities, or on the basis of their membership to an identifiable social group. Gay and lesbian identity politics enunciated in the gay niche marketing discourse is reflective of the gay and lesbian identity politics in the mainstream gay and lesbian movement based on which the movement is organized. Scholars have indicated that identity has served as the principle basis for social groups to mobilize as well as for individuals to consume. Identity thus becomes both a personal feature and a

dimension to be negotiated through market exchanges. Identity-based production, distribution, and consumption are characteristics and functions of modern consumer culture (Chasin 2000). Evans (1993) further indicates that modern citizenship has increasingly focused on the rights of consumption. Advertising and marketing activities thus play an important role in the reciprocal and ever changing process of individual consumers' identity formation, especially for disenfranchised consumer groups who are otherwise marginalized in the public sphere.

*Gay Rights Movement, Gay Press, and the Gay Niche Market*

The development of the gay niche market is not an accident or a natural result of a supposed higher tolerance of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. It has been cultivated by marketers' niche marketing strategies, gay press' inducement, and the post-Stonewall gay rights movements (Sender 2002). Chasin (2000) indicates that the gay community has emerged along with the more active gay movements after the Stonewall Riot[1] and the growth of gay press. While the gay liberation movement mobilized gays and lesbians in a visible way, the gay press, born in the 1950s and proliferated in the post-Stonewall era, has created a sense of community by reporting in-group interests, constructing common symbols, and publicizing in-group language. As Chasin (2000) suggests,

[1] In 1969, gay men, drag queens and lesbians rioted in response to a police raid on a gay bar in the Stonewall Inn, Greenwich Village, New York City. The Stonewall Riot was followed by several days of demonstrations in New York, and was the impetus for the formation of the Gay Liberation Front. The riot is often referred to as the beginning of the gay liberation movement.

> The national U.S. gay community came into being through the imagined comradeship of gay men and lesbians reading an increasingly commercial gay press. In that press, gay men and lesbians read for news of the growth of the movement, they read for news of consumption opportunities that reinforces their belonging in the community, and they read vernacular language that helps delineate the boundaries of the community (p. 92).

The regularly published and mass-produced gay press, particularly those published at the national scale, make believe that there are many other gay people reading the same news, caring about the same issues, and sharing the same beliefs, which creates a sense of comradeship in an immense community. Yet the imagined national gay community is far from a homogenous and harmonious one; it is composed of diverse sub-groups of gay people of different genders, ethnicities, religions, and classes, with often dissentient political agendas. It is important to note that it was the predominantly white gay male press that had effectively constructed the face of a national gay community (Sender 2004; Chasin 2000).

The development of gay-themed press, gay market, and gay advertising are interdependent and closely intertwined. Scholars have argued that the news reports and media coverage of the lesbian and gay civil rights movement, within both mainstream and gay publications, forged the link between an increasingly visible and media-savvy gay rights movement and a diversifying publishing industry, which later nurtured the emergence of a national gay community and gay market (Alwood 1996; Streitmatter 1995). The growth of gay press and gay media depend on and contribute to the development of the gay niche market, while the later depends heavily on the increasing advertising money targeted to gay consumers.

Several minority groups have gone through the similar path from identity politics and social movement to identity-based niche marketing. For example, Chasin (2000) argues that women have been targeted aggressively ever since they earned the constitutional right to vote in 1920. After the victory of Civil Rights Act, African Americans also drew advertisers and marketers' attention as a noteworthy consumer segment. The "discovery" of the Latino market in the 1980s also reflects the Latino social movement gains (Peñaloza 1996). In particular, lesbian and gay male activists came to discover a new weapon to fight for gay liberation in the 1970s. As part of their protest against a national homophobic campaign led by Anita Bryant, lesbians and gay male consumers across the United States boycotted Florida orange juice, which used Bryant as its spokesperson. When the boycott succeeded in Bryant's dismissal, the gay community evidenced the economic strength they wielded. Since then, the economic power of the gay community has been heavily cultivated by gay rights activists as well as by mainstream marketers.

*A Historical Review of the Development of Gay Advertising*

In Sender's (2001) comprehensive review of ads and consumer-related content from gay, lesbian, bisexual, HIV positive, pornographic, and other magazines from 1967 to the late 90s, she points out that through the 1950s and 1960s few, if any, ads appeared in the mainstream media that openly showed gay men or lesbians. After the Stonewall Riots of 1969, the Gay Liberation Movement brought the existence of gay people into the public view and focused on the issue of visibility. Publishers and advertisers began to turn their attention to gay consumers in the mid-1970s. Yet while advertisers started to

place ads in gay media, mainstream venues for advertising to gay consumers were limited. While national corporations remained reluctant to address explicit gay appeals in mainstream media, the second half of the 1970s saw a rapid expansion of advertising from mainstream marketers in the gay press. Corporate interests in reaching gay consumers, largely through advertising only in gay media, continued in the early 1980s, with few adventurous marketing moves that feature the first openly gay ads by a national company. Due to the AIDS epidemic, however, 1984 to 1989 was marked by the rapid withdrawal of many marketers' advertising campaigns targeting the gay community through gay media (for an extensive review, see Sender 2004).

The 1990s were distinguished by a renewed interest in the gay market from both the trade press and advertisers themselves, an interest that has increased exponentially. The economic recession at the beginning of the decade propelled marketers to search for new consumer segments and they "discovered" the so-reportedly affluent consumers, "the gay dream consumers." The marketing discourse on gay advertising has been extremely celebratory. For example, much marketing press implies that advertising empowers gay and lesbians by suggesting personal emancipation could be achieved through the market and individual consumption. Some even argue that in the 1990s, the market has been portrayed as perhaps the most accessible resource for self-empowerment, individual identity formation, and identifying group affiliation for many gay people (Chasin 2000).

Gay advertising, which began with a few adventurous companies, such as Absolut Vodka in 1979, is now a certifiable trend sponsored by many mainstream advertisers,

including the conservative Cadillac (Halliday 2004), which produced ads with ambiguous or explicit sexual innuendo portraying gay characters in 2004. Simultaneously, throughout the 1990s, there was an explosion of discourses about the gay market circulating in the mainstream media, the gay press, advertising trade publications, and scholarly journals (Chasin 2000). In 1993, *Advertising Age*, a widely circulated advertising trade publication, issued a "Special Report: Marketing to Gays and Lesbians." In 1995, *American Demographics* featured an article announcing that the gay niche market was "Out of the Closet," in which the stereotype of gays as "dream consumers" is well illustrated.

> The gay and lesbian market is an untapped gold mine. Because gays are highly educated and usually have no dependents, they have high levels of disposable income. And because these consumers are disenfranchised from mainstream society, they are open to overtures from marketers. ("Out of the Closet," *American Demographics,* May 1995, 40-46)

Additionally, along with the booming gay market, gay media and gay-targeted advertising agencies are also proliferating. The *Advocate* has been joined by many other gay-specific magazines. The GLBT-oriented TV channel, LOGO, was launched in 2005 by the MTV network. All of these national gay media owe their very existence to advertising dollars from mainstream marketers.

*Discourses on Gay Advertising and Gay Marketing*

For many participants in the gay niche market, the boom of the gay market and growth of gay advertising are the most visible signs of progress. Commentators manifested the importance of being recognized in the media as well as in the marketplace.

"By addressing gays and lesbians as consumers…marketers and advertisers constitute them in important ways, rendering them identifiable and intelligible, particularly in a capitalist society" (Field 1996). In addition to appealing to individual consumers, gay-themed advertising also hails gay consumers as members of identifiable social groups and thus magnifies the sense of a community. For GLBT people unaccustomed to seeing images of themselves on mass media, let alone being taken seriously and affirmative as explicitly gay or lesbian, national corporate appeals to the gay market can be profoundly affirming.

Other commentators also express optimism that this increasing visibility facilitates a wider acceptance of gay and lesbian people among heterosexuals (Sender 2004). As the gay journalist Grant Lukenbill (1995) suggests, gay and lesbian consumerism is already affecting much of America's commercial media imagery as well as corporate policies. Marketers' marketing intentions of courting the gay market has forced certain corporations to demonstrate an awareness or support of gay issues, including instigating nondiscrimination and employing domestic partnership policies. Marketers' investments in gay market also provide vital resources to numerous nonprofit groups. For example, Absolut Vodka has offered long-term support to GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation).

It is important to recognize that it is the economic pressure and incentive that has led mainstream advertisers and companies to recognize and embrace the gay market or the "gay lifestyle," but not necessarily the politicized "gay agenda" proposed by the gay rights movement. Yet, it is equally important to acknowledge how economic resources

and the related class issues have crucial impacts on GLBT consumers, and how advertising targeting gay consumers manifests marketing ideologies that attempt to define and shape the contemporary conception of gayness. Many works in gay and lesbian studies have noted the interlacing discourses that work to mold sexual identity in Western society—medical, legal, religious, etc. Only recently do we witness more research attention to examining how marketing discourses also contribute to the social construction of sexual identity (e.g., Griffin 1998; Sender 2004; Chasin 2000; Kates 1997).

In a nutshell, the optimistic perspective argues that advertising to the gay market serves to legitimize gay people as individuals and members of an intelligible subculture in the U.S. However, the early excitement of being praised by the marketers has grown into a more skeptical and critical attitude as the gay market fledges. Kates (2004) suggested that advertising to the gay community gradually became insufficient in itself for obtaining brand legitimacy in the gay community. Many GLBT consumers have attempted to extend meanings of brands by actively searching for information on the company's policies and history, in order to judge the brands' real intentions toward the community.

Furthermore, while the images of gay people as savvy consumers can be considered as "positive representations" by many, scholars and gay activists have shown concerns about some detrimental consequences of the "dream consumer" stereotype of gay and lesbians in the mass media. They are concerned that gay advertising misrepresents the diverse communities which may lead to long-term negative effects on

GLBT politics as well as a problematic mainstreaming effect on queer subcultures. Michael Bronski (1984) offers one of the earliest critiques of media construction of the white, upper-middle class, professional, urban, trendy and fashionable gay man as representative of the community. Gluckman and Reed (1993) also warned us that gay-targeted advertising is only a "limited victory" because "the real contours of the multicultural, class-stratified gay populations are languishing in the closet" (p.17).

Other marketing scholars further commented on the problems of identity-based gay niche marketing strategy. Bhat (1996) argues that sexual orientation can serve only as a "descriptor" of a segment rather than as a base of segmentation. He adds that using a descriptor for segmentation often results in superficial stereotyping, assuming everyone who fits the segment behaves in the same way. For example, Fugate (1993) argues that lesbians and gay men "constituted a definable market segment only so long as specific activities, interests, and opinions deal with their sexuality" (p. 47). As a critique of Fugate's (1993) classification of gay men and lesbians as a lifestyle segment, Peñaloza (1996) argues that Fugate's categorization reduces gay and lesbian culture to sexuality, and trivializes the complexities of gay people's lives.

Having briefly reviewed the history of the gay niche market and gay advertising, representations of GLBT people in gay-targeted television commercials are further examined in Chapter IV to illuminate how the gay consumers are portrayed.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Scholars have argued that identity construction is the nexus of public discourses and individual subjectivities (Clark 1998). To understand the role of commercial media in audiences' identity construction, identity theories in psychology and in social science are reviewed and discussed in the first part of this section. Consumer culture theory and audience reception theory that serve as the theoretical framework of this dissertation research are explained and analyzed in relation to the study of gay audiences and gay consumers.

### Identity Theory: The Evolution of Eriksonian Identity Theory

Identity theory is one of the most influential social psychological theories. The evolution of the study of identity formation can be traced from Freud's early writings to Erikson's theorization, Marcia's empirical operationalization, and finally to several alternative theories that have been introduced in the past twenty years (Schwartz 2001).

Erikson is one of the earliest and most influential theorists to establish the tradition of identity theory. In Erikson's (1950) Psychosocial Identity Development model, identity is organized into three levels according to the degree of embeddedness of self in context. As the most fundamental level, Erikson postulates *ego identity* as ego synthesis and continuity of personal character. At the intersection of self and context, Erikson considers *personal identity* as the set of goals, values, and beliefs that one shows to others. Personal identity includes career goals, dating preferences, and other aspects of self that help to distinguish an individual from other people. At the most contextually

oriented level, *social identity* is classified as a sense of inner solidarity with a group's ideals. Aspects of self such as gender, native language, country of origin, and racial background thus fall under the heading of *social identity*.

Erikson's theory is unique and influential in that it encompasses the entire life cycle and recognizes the impacts of interpersonal relationships, society, history, and culture on the self. Erikson's concept of identity is multidimensional and extensive in its scope and coverage, but lacks theoretical precision (Côté and Levine 1987). Therefirem based on Erikson's theory, Marcia (1966) proposes four independent identity statuses: identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement. Each of Marcia's is associated with a distinct set of personality characteristics but there is no clearly defined developmental order between the statuses.

Specifically, identity achievement symbolizes a commitment to a specific identity after a period of exploration. Achievement is often conceptualized as the most mature status or the end stage. The identity-achieved individual is one who has gone through identity search and has determined the elements to adhere. Identity moratorium is the state of active exploration without a commitment. The moratorium status is often associated with disturbance and stress. Identity foreclosure is the state of being committed to a set of values and beliefs without prior exploration. Generally, foreclosure is associated with some degree of closed-mindedness, self-centered attitude and self-satisfaction, and rigidity. Foreclosed individuals therefore are more likely to be authoritarian. They also tend to resist changes in life and values. Identity diffusion is the

status without exploration and commitment. Identify-diffused people are generally apathetic and indifferent.

Marcia's identity statuses have been highly influential in identity research, especially in the field of psychology. However, in the past twenty years, scholars have argued that Marcia's identity statuses provide too narrow a conceptualization of identity, often reducing the richness and depth of a one-hour identity interview to a single status assignment.

Accordingly, Côté and Levine (1988) called for the extension, expansion, and reinterpretation of Erikson's identity theory beyond the constraints of identity status. A number of alternative identity models have emerged since 1987. Most of the recent neo-Eriksonian models pay attention to both personal and social identity, and to the interaction between the two. For example, Adams and Marshall (1996), Côté (1997), and Kurtines (1995) all focus on identity crisis among socially marginalized individuals who are likely to suffer from excessive differentiation from social ideals (Adams and Marshall 1996) and disenfranchisement from conventional social institutions (Côté 1997). In particular, Berzonsky's (1990) identity styles, Kurtines' (1995) co-constructivist model, Adam's (1996) developmental contextual approach all have focused on the interaction of personal identity and social identity, which are the main concerns in this dissertation study.

Berzonsky (1990) proposes that personal identity is constructed by means of social interactions. In his approach to identity formation, people are viewed as self-theorists who create working models of the world around them. As scientists, individuals

are actively able to choose from among the informational style (problem-solving), normative style (imitation and conformity) and diffuse–avoidant style (emotion-focused coping strategy) as the style that best appears to suit them.

Also inspired by Erikson, Kurtines (1995) views identity development as occurring at the interaction and negotiation between self and society, with individual development and social–institutional processes mutually influencing one another. From Kurtines's viewpoint, the individual is viewed as an active, self-oriented subject who chooses from available identity alternatives and is responsible for those choices and their consequences. Furthermore, Kurtines (1995) has focused on identity crisis among social minorities, as he argues that the reciprocal relation between self and social institutions are most likely to empower those individuals whose personality attributes reflect the characteristics, beliefs, and ideals of the social institutions. Individuals who do not share the attributes valued by mainstream social institutions are thus at risk of becoming alienated.

Another model with a multidimensional focus is Adam and Marshall's developmental contextual approach (Adams & Marshall 1996). Whereas Kurtines considers context as one broadly-defined phenomenon, Adams and Marshall classify the social context, in which identity is assumed to be embedded, into two levels: the micro and macro contexts. The micro context refers to interpersonal exchanges and relations in which personal identity is directly affected by conversations and other forms of direct contact. The macro context refers to more overarching social and cultural contexts in which social identity is molded by the cultural norms, traditions, and beliefs. The effects

of the macro context are implemented through micro contexts, as cultural norms are taught to children through cultural institutions of family, education, and mass media. Adams and Marshall further distinguish between identity elements that are assigned and those that are chosen. Assigned identity elements are integrated by way of imitation and identification. Such elements are borrowed directly from the social or cultural environment and integrated into one's identity with little or no modification. Chosen identity elements are added to identity through self-construction, specifically through information seeking and personal explorations. The developmental contextual perspective offered by Adams and Marshall might be seen as a midpoint between Kurtines's (1995) co-constructivist approach, which incorporates contextual elements but is still individualistic, while Côté's (1997) identity capital model, which focuses primarily on the social and cultural context of identity development.

Côté (1997) proposes a sociological view of identity, called the identity capital model which primarily focuses on the social–structural level of identity. His theory is mainly concerned with results of identity formation—the social viability of the identity that one possesses. Identity components, such as specific skills, beliefs, or attitudes, are seen as resources that individuals can utilize in the process of negotiating for social memberships, status, and other societal assets. Identity capital resources include financial assets, social group memberships and intangible resources like personality attributes and personal tastes that signify one's ability to exchange social assets with others and with social institutions. In overall terms, one's identity capital refers to one's resources in terms of who one is and what one has accomplished. Côté suggests that in the

sociological context, these assets and accomplishments help one to establish a viable sense of adulthood and to surround oneself with a validating community.

The review of the evolution of identity theory indicates that understanding how identity is embedded in personal, social and cultural contexts has become a significant area for identity research. More importantly for this study, in the recent stream of identity research that focuses on the social and cultural contexts for a multidimensional identity formation, the identity formation process of various social minorities has become a crucial area for investigation. For those who are not members of the majority cultural group, such as sexual and ethnic minorities, and define themselves in relation to both their own groups and the mainstream, culture becomes an additional aspect of identity formation. Particularly, mass media has been commonly theorized as an important contextual factor affecting the identity formation process of socially marginalized individuals. Yet, much empirical work remains to be done concerning the role of mass media in individuals' identity formation.

**Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity Formation**

The development of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) sexual identity, often equated with the coming-out process, is a particularly difficult process of identity formation and integration because of the social stigmatization of this identity. Specifically, the coming-out process, which is a unique identity formation process for sexual minorities, has attracted considerable theoretical attention. In particular, the developmental process of coming out that emerged in the fields of psychology have been influential (e.g., Cass 1979; Morris, 1997; for a review, see Eliason, 1996). The

psychosocial model proposed by Cass (1979) is probably the best known model, and the most extensively researched. The Sexual Identity Formation (SIF) model integrates both psychological and social factors through six stages of identity formation, from identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, and pride to identity synthesis.

In general scholars have indicated that GLB identity formation is achieved through the coming-out process in which individuals become aware of their developing sexual orientation, begin to question whether they may be GLB, and explore their emerging GLB identity by engaging in sexual activities (Hunter et al. 1998). The coming-out process then continues by integrate oneself into the community to consolidate and maintain one's GLB identity. The end stage of the process, identity integration, refers to the process in which individuals become more accepting of their GLB identity, resolve internalized homophobia by adopting more positive attitudes towards homosexuality, feel more comfortable with others knowing about their sexual identity, disclose that identity to others, and become involved in GLB social activities (Hunter et al. 1998).

However, critiques of coming out models have challenged the developmental models for the assumed linear stages, existence of an end state, and the omission of racial and ethnic diversity, gender difference, social constructs and contexts, and political differences. Studies have shown that many GLB individuals can skip steps, experience steps in various orders, or abort the process and return to heterosexual identity (Hunt et al. 1998). Specifically related to this dissertation research is the criticism of an end state, as Rust (1996) argues that coming out process is never finished, but a lifelong process, considering the fluid nature of human sexuality and identity. Cain (1991) also argues that

current models of GLB identity formation fail to recognize adequately the social and cultural factors, such as the influences of mass media, which shape the ways GLB individuals manage information concerning their sexual preferences.

Moreover, for GLB people of color, the coming-out process is further complicated by sociocultural factors that operate to hinder the process. Extensive writings about Asian, Latino and Black GLB individuals have suggested that cultural factors such as the importance of family, traditional gender roles, conservative religious values, and widespread homophobia within their own ethnic community may lead many ethnic/racial minority individuals to experience difficulties in the formation and integration of a GLB sexual identity (e.g., Diaz, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1996). Additionally, racism within the predominantly White GLB community may further complicate the coming-out process for GLB people of color (e. g., Han 2005; Icard 1986; Savin-Williams 1996) by isolating them, instead of integrating them. Ethnic/racial GLB individuals are often caught between two major discriminations: (a) the stronger cultural pressure in their ethnic/racial communities favoring heterosexuality and discouraging or punishing homosexuality, and (b) racism and discrimination in the predominantly White GLB community that alienates ethnic/racial minority individuals from the one community that consistently validates an GLB identity and provides resources to GLB individuals.

More importantly for this dissertation research, scholars have suggested that gay representations in mass media have a substantial influence on gay people's identity formation and self-perception (Hunt et al. 1998), especially upon gay youth (Kivel 2000;

Amico 2005) who often grow up without peer supports and gay role models with which to identify. Also, media have been cited as the most important contemporary factor in the socialization of gay men and lesbians (Hicks, 2002). This study thus proposes to contribute to the understanding of the role of mass media, specifically gay representations in mainstream commercials, in lesbian and gay audiences' identity formation and maintenance.

## Identity Theory in Media Studies: Identity as Actively Constructed or Negotiated?

After a review of identity theories and GLB identity formation models proposed in the fields of psychology, and before we turn to the consumer culture theory and audience reception theory, a brief discussion of the theorization of identity in media studies would better connect the two distinct paradigms to offer a more inclusive approach to identity construction and individual agency, which are the key concerns in this dissertation project.

### *American Culture Studies*

In the empirical work of media studies, the American cultural studies school is characterized by its embrace of humanism and liberal-pluralism, interested in questions of how media "assist" in providing cultural cohesiveness and stability. This perspective assumes that a cohesive identity, both individual and collective, is both desirable and achievable, and that the media serve as an integrative agent in social relations. Research on identity within the American cultural studies model thus has focused on how the

media serve as a productive resource to achieve and maintain the coherence of identity. As White (1994) writes,

> Audience members may take identity models directly from the media or media may supply the identity achievement strategies and sources of validation of identities (p. 14).

Another approach central to this paradigm is concerned with the role of media in audiences' social relations, such as how specific social groups "use" media texts as a resource in interpersonal relationships to express and validate their own identities, and how the practice of media viewing help to define, negotiate, and confirm their social roles (Lull 1980; Clark 1998).

*Uses and Gratifications Theory*

In a similar vein, the "uses and gratifications" tradition also views self as an active agent in the meaning-making process of media reception and foregrounds individual agency. Katz (1959) writes,

> …less attention [should be paid] to what media do to people and more to what people do with the media. Such an approach assumes that even the most potent of mass media content cannot ordinarily influence an individual who has no 'use' for it …The 'uses' approach assumes that people's values, their interests, their associations, their social roles, are pre-potent and that people selectively 'fashion' what they see and hear to these interests (p.2)

The "uses and gratifications" approach is concerned with the factors that motivate an individual audience to utilize media to fulfill their needs and thus primarily focuses on the individual level. For example, the empirical works in *Constructing the Self in a Mediated World,* edited by Grodin and Lindlof (1996), focus on how people use media

texts, including talk shows, self-help books, magazines, and rap music, in the construction of self. Furthermore, several writers in the book have conceived of identity within the psychological frameworks, examining concepts like self-esteem, self-fulfillment, and the therapeutic consumption of media. Identity and media are thus placed in a functionalist framework of social cohesion.

*Critical Cultural Theories*

Cultural studies constitute another major research stream in recent media studies. The focus on the "dialectic" relations between individual agency and the broader social structure distinguishes the critical cultural studies approach from the aforementioned models as the critical cultural studies approach pays special attention to the limits of individual agency and the negotiated meaning-making process.

Moores (1995) argues that the critical cultural studies approach does not simply categorize the subject's interpretations of media but understand them in relation to the broader socio-historical contexts. In particular, the power relations structuring the subject's position and those that are negotiated between individuals and the sociocultural institutions have to be carefully analyzed. As Ang (1996) explains the purpose of cultural studies,

> The aim of cultural studies is not a matter of dissecting 'audience activity' in ever more refined variables as categories so that we can ultimately have a complete and generalizable formal 'map' of all social, political, economic and cultural forces. In other words, what is at stake is not the understanding of 'audience activity' as such as an isolated and isolatable object of research, but the embeddedness of 'audience activity' in a complex network of ongoing cultural practices and relationship (p.42).

The concept of identity in this dissertation is informed by the critical cultural studies tradition. Identity is defined in this dissertation as more than the configuration of demographic factors, but an elusive and fluid category which may be more useful for capturing the dialectic relationships between the individual and his or her social environment. Informed by critical cultural studies, this dissertation proposes to investigate the role of media in audiences' identity formation and maintenance through a cultural studies approach. And it is through the analysis of identity narratives articulated by audiences in media discourses that we can come to understand the dialectic interactions between individual audience and mediated marketing culture.

**Consumer Culture Theory**

Consumer culture researchers have explored the heterogeneous distribution of meanings that exist within the broader socio-historic frame of market capitalism. In their review of consumer culture research over the past 20 years, Arnold and Thompson (2005) coined the term "consumer culture theory" to describe the research tradition that is not a unified, grand theory, but "a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings" (868). Although demonstrating heterogeneity in their theoretical approaches and research objectives, consumer culture researchers share a common theoretical orientation toward the study of market-mediated relations between lived experiences, social resources, and consumption cultures (Arnold and Thompson 2005). In this section, consumer culture theory proposed by Arnold and Thompson (2005) that informs my interdisciplinary

theoretical framework is explained and discussed in relation to the study of gay consumer culture and gay audiences' reading strategies.

Due to a focus on the various dimensions of personal, experiential, sociocultural, and political aspects of consumption, including concerns with product symbolism, ritual practices, and brand communities, the field, rather than the laboratory, serves as the natural context for consumer culture research (Arnold and Thompson 2005). Consequently, consumer culture research has been developed mostly through ethnographic and qualitative studies that analyze how particular consumer cultures are constituted, reproduced, transformed, and shaped by broader sociohistoric forces, such as myths, social forces, and ideologies, and contextualized in specific socioeconomic circumstances and marketplace systems (Arnold and Thompson 2005).

Specifically, consumer culture theory explores how consumers actively rework, negotiate, and transform symbolic meanings circulated in advertisements, associated with products, and practiced in retail settings, to manifest their particular personal and social backgrounds, and further their identity and lifestyle goals (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Holt 2002; Mick and Buhl 1992; Peñaloza 2000, 2001; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Scott 1994). In particular, research on subcultural consumption has contributed significantly to the *negotiated* nature of consumers' reappropriation of brands' symbolic meanings. For example, Peñaloza's (1994) study on Latino consumers demonstrates that the meanings Latino consumers associate with various products and services are often different from mainstream consumers' meaning making of the same products and services.

In the following section, the four key aspects of consumer culture theory categorized by Arnold and Thompson (2005) consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, and the mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies are presented.

*Consumer Identity Projects*

Consumer culture theory is concerned with the co-constructive, co-productive ways in which consumers negotiate with marketing materials to forge a sense of self (Belk 1988; McCracken 1986). The marketplace is conceptualized to be a critical source of symbolic meanings with which consumers, including those who lack economic resources, are able to construct identity narratives (Belk 1988; Holt 2002). In this perspective, consumers are conceived of as identity seekers and makers (Arnold and Thompson 2005). For instance, Kates (2004) reports that gay consumers often transform and customize brand meanings that enhance their own coming-out identity projects and gay rights ideology.

More importantly, consumer culture theorists have focused on the relationship between consumers' identity projects and the structure of the marketplace, arguing that the market produces certain privileged consumer positions. As individuals “improvise and personalize their identity projects through these consumer positions, they are also aligning their identities with the structuring imperatives of a consumer-driven economy” (Arnold and Thompson 2005, p.875). For instance, Kozinets (2001) explores how fan identity is implicated with utopian ideals reappropriating specific social ideologies promoted by corporate media. Belk and his colleagues (2003) also explore how consumer

subjects are hailed and constructed by the market ideals endorsed in the discourses of global corporate capitalism.

*Marketplace Cultures*

Research on marketplace cultures addresses some of the most distinctive features of the intersection between the market and culture. Related to consumers' identity seeking and maintenance through consumption, consumers are also seen as culture producers. The key concern raised in this perspective is the role of consumption as a key practice that serves as cultural blueprints (Arnold and Thompson 2005). This stream of consumer culture research also addresses the ways in which consumers construct sense of group solidarity and create distinctive, self-selected subcultures through the pursuit of common consumption interests (Kozinets 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). These works are often described as a subculture of consumption (Kates 2002a; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), a consumption world (Holt 1995), a consumption microculture (Thompson and Troester 2002) or a culture of consumption (Kozinets 2001).

Therefore, this genre of consumer culture theory research has emphasized the tribal aspects of consumption, such as studies on brand communities. These studies highlight how consumption activities and the related shared beliefs, sensibilities, practices, and experiences., such as skydiving (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993), fandom (Kozinets 2001), alternative lifestyles (Kates 2002a; Thompson and Troester 2002), and consumption communities (Arnould and Price 1993;  Kozinets 2002), can help construct communities and forge group identities.

Studies on subcultural consumption have also shown that the symbolic boundaries of marketplace cultures are constantly contested through different consumer groups' endeavors to redefine in-group status, social norms, and consumer culture (Kates 2002a; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). In this perspective, marketplace is considered to be a politics-laden terrain reflective of (minority) consumer groups' ongoing struggle against the dominant society. In particular, in-group social status in these consumer subcultures is negotiated through localized and contextualized cultural capital that consumers can earn through reworking and transforming the symbolic meanings circulated in marketplace (Kates 2002a; Kozinets 2001, 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002).

*The Sociohistoric Patterning of Consumption*

The third aspect of consumer culture theory that Arnold and Thompson (2005) theorized is concerned with various social identity factors that systematically influence consumption practices, such as class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and gender. In this research domain, consumers are perceived as enactors of social roles and positions (Arnold and Thompson 2005). Studies have explored consumption practices formed around social class hierarchies (Allen 2002; Holt 1998), gender (Bristor and Fischer 1993; Thompson and Haytko 1997), and ethnicity (Mehta and Belk 1991). For example, Holt (1998) shows how cultural capital distributed by social class hierarchy has systematically formed consumer preferences.

*Mass-Mediated Marketplace Ideologies and Consumers' Interpretive Strategies*

Much work on this research field overlaps with critical cultural studies and media studies, as semiotic and literary critical theories are the common theoretical tools used. Studies informed by this perspective investigate consumption ideologies embedded in commercial media and the rhetorical tactics and narratives that are employed to make these appeals possible. More importantly, studies operating in this research domain explore how particular cultural production systems, such as advertising, work to systematically predispose consumers toward certain kinds of subjective positions and identity projects.

Specifically related to this dissertation project on gay audience's reading of gay-targeted commercials, this domain of consumer culture theory considers popular culture texts, including advertisements, as lifestyle and identity project guidelines that convey marketplace ideologies and idealized consumer types (Hirschman 1988; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998; Peñaloza 1996). By decoding and deconstructing mass-mediated marketplace ideologies from advertising texts, consumer culture theorists reveal the ways in which capitalist cultural production systems hail consumers and invite them to embrace certain identity ideal and lifestyle goals (Arnold and Thompson 2005). Additionally, by recognizing the nature of reading advertising as socially contextualized, negotiated in personal and social settings, and politically informed, the advertising medium is likely occupy a far more important place in the lives of some individuals, such as GLBT minorities who might aspire to see social acceptance of gays in mass media.

Therefore, much work in this research domain explores consumers' meaning-making of mediated marketing communications messages and their reading strategies (Sender 1998; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Murray, Ozanne, and Shapiro 1994). Consumers are positioned as interpretive agents whose reading strategies range from accepting the dominant or preferred representations and appeals, to selectively accepting, consciously rejecting, or unconsciously recreating and transforming the symbolic meaning suggested in advertising texts (Arnold and Thompson 2005). Consumers' self-perception in relation to the mainstream society and the power relations that come into work between their social position and the hegemonic culture are particularly crucial to understanding consumers' choice of reading strategies. This emphasis on consumers' diverse interpretive strategies reflects the recognition of the fluid and constructed nature of personal identity. In particular, research on consumers' resistant readings highlights the creative and individualized ways in which consumers critically reinterpret media and advertising ideals and ideological inducements. For example, Mick and Buhl (1992) categorize the way in which consumers' life themes and life projects shape their readings of advertisements. They argue that consumers often modify advertisements to fit their life circumstances rather than feel a pressure to conform to a specific ideological representation. Ritson and Elliott (1999) also argue that advertisements provide a social resource for interpresonal bonding and conversational interactions in which consumers collectively critique and rework the meanings of a given ad campaign. GLBT consumers' reading strategies of gay advertising, especially the malleable gay window advertising,

would help us understand consumers' choice of reading strategies as well as the textual structures that work to predispose consumers.

As literature in consumer culture research has suggested, the structuring influence of the marketplace hails to a certain consumer position through advertisements. A desiring consumer subject is likely to be constituted by the market ideologies, such as the idea that personal emancipation and social acceptance could be achieved through consumption. Advertising that carry explicitly gay positive references or identifiable gay characters can be further integrated into gay consumers' identity projects while predisposing them toward a certain identity project and ideal consumer type.

Furthermore, as scholars have suggested, advertisements are often experienced and evaluated outside of the media context in which they are conventionally viewed (Ritson and Elliott 1999) and are often consumed independent of the product it sponsors (Willis 1990; Nava 1992). For example, gay-referenced advertisements are often disseminated among gay consumers, through word-of-mouth, email circulations, gay press and on the Internet. The intended function and meanings of advertising messages can change as they migrate from the textual context of their presentation to the context of social interactions. Gay-referenced advertising texts can also be translated into GLBT consumers' social and cultural capital and actualized for interpersonal relationships, in-group status and communal ties, contributing to the construction of a gay consumer subculture. Kates (2000) suggests that gay consumers' behaviors organized around brands are acts that "create and maintain the ties that construct a gay community" (p. 504). Given the fact that advertising functions as a key source of brand information,

conversation about gay positive and gay-bashing commercials to identify and confirm political allies and "brand enemies" Kates (2000) in the marketplace can be common among gay consumers. In this way, gay advertising may play a phatic role in strengthening existing group structures and interpersonal relations through GLBT consumers' discussion and decoding of ambiguously coded gay window commercials in daily conversation and shared excitement of spotting a GLBT positive commercial.

Based on the literature on subcultural consumption, the first topic that requires reconsideration is the relationship between the consumption of marketing communication texts and a subculture's internal ethos. Consumer culture research on subcultures has stressed the oppositional subcultural or countercultural characteristics against mainstream culture. In particular, the ways the members use goods to define symbolic community boundaries have been heavily investigated (Kates 2002a). However, the boundary-maintenance function of subcultural consumption is problematized when the brands and related advertising messages targeting the community carries a strong assimilationist appeal. The negotiation between an oppositional subcultural identity and an assimilationist aspiration are theorized in this dissertation through the analysis of gay marketing and gay subcultural consumption.

**Audience Reception Theory**

In this section, the relationship between the audience and media texts is examined in its relation to lesbian and gay audiences. Works addressing this relationship are discussed to situate this analysis within the literature.

Media audience as a subject of inquiry has evolved significantly over the past decade. The past few years have witnessed the development, refinement and differentiation of approaches that focus on the "active audience" in media studies (Ang 1996). Scholars pointed out that the current body of media audience research is far from cohesive. Issues of research approach, the role of the researcher, and even study objectives often differ across paradigms (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Yet, the uniting interest in the role of media on audiences' identity project as an overarching theme bridges the various research efforts.

In a similar vein, one of the most recent developments in advertising research has been the emergence of "meaning-based" approaches to advertising (Mick and Buhl 1992; Scott 1994). Meaning-based approaches stress that media texts are polysemic and audiences of various identification positions may produce various interpretations of the same text, an argument widely recognized within theories of popular culture and mass communication (see Condit 1989 for a review). Such perspectives differ from the traditional information processing approach to advertising reception by arguing that advertising meanings are "constructed within the semantic frame" of the text by the audience rather than simply being "delivered in content" by advertising (Anderson 1988, p. 25). Audience agency is highlighted through the more active concept of

"interpretation" rather than "reception." This subtle shift in the advertising's semantic locus has had a number of major theoretical implications for the study of advertising interpretation. Focus has moved from the patterns among mass audience towards understanding audiences' interpretations as multiple and shifting based on social position and personal experience (Fiske 1989; Ang 1996). Rather than searching for effects of media on the public as a whole, the meaning-based approach to empirically understanding audiences often involves in-depth examination of the meaning-making process. By focusing on the audience's individual and contextualized interpretations, the meaning produced through the interaction of the reader and the text becomes a central concern.

Within this perspective, the meaning of the advertising text is actualized by individual audience members in a way that is congruent with their own experiences and perspectives. In shifting from information-based to meaning-based models, focus is redirected from the text to the reader because meaning-based models empower the individual audience with the capability of selecting a specific and contextualized reading from a plurality of possible interpretations. As Reina Lewis argues, "The problem becomes one of relationships between meanings in which the viewer's decoding activities may operate from a variety of positions each of which utilizes a different set of competencies that may be addressed by the text" (1992, p. 105).

A growing body of evidence of advertising's polysemic nature has emerged in recent years (e.g., Kates 1999; Sender 1999; Mick and Buhl 1992). Polysemy refers to the "interpretive scope of media texts, the argument being that several interpretations

coexist as potentials in any one text" (Jensen 1995, p. 75). What is missing from the literature, however, is a systematic study of advertising audiences' interpretations that demonstrates not only that advertising is polysemic but also explores the sources of such polysemy within and across different interpretive communities (Kates 2002b).

The audience study of this dissertation research is informed by Hall's (1980) approach to audiences' meaning-making process and interpretation strategies. His Encoding/Decoding notion significantly advanced the conceptualization of the active audience and has been widely employed in media audience studies and critical cultural studies. In John Storey's assessment, Halls' "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" (1980) is the "founding moment when cultural studies first emerges from …'pessimistic' views of Marxism, American mass communications models, culturalism and structuralism" (1996, p.9). Hall explains that the meaning contained in media texts is often times not the same as the meaning actualized by the audience because the process of reading and viewing media texts becomes a negotiation process between the viewer and the text. It is important to note that Hall's model addresses how messages can be polysemic yet still "structured in dominance" (Morley 1980, p.12). By placing encoding and decoding as distinctive but related processes with their own conditions of existence, Hall opened up a new theoretical space for signifying struggles built on the premise of no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding. Central to the model is the concept of a "preferred meaning", which refers to the dominant meanings encoded in a text, which can attempt to prefer but cannot prescribe or determine the viewer's decoding. The preferred meaning encoded in texts is often

analyzed through in-depth textual analysis in critical cultural studies and media studies. In contrast to the preferred meaning on the encoding aspect, he describes three hypothetical decoding positions—hegemonic or dominant reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional decoding—depending on audiences' social positions, personal experiences, identity factors, and the media and social contexts in which the decoding process occurs.

Based on Hall's encoding/decoding model, David Morley's study *The Nationwide Audience* has been acknowledged as one of the most influential works in the development of the new audience research. In testing Hall's encoding/decoding model, Morley started with a detailed textual analysis of the *Nationwide* television program to elucidate the basic codes of meanings and implicit ideologies inscribed in the text. In the second part of the project, Morley investigated in audiences' decoding processes as an encounter between two determining forces—the preferred meanings of a text and viewers' social positions predisposed by certain kinds of discourses and experiences (Morley 1992, p. 119). Thus, Morley's research testing Hall's encoding/decoding concept provides a theoretical model for this dissertation.

In addition to Morley's *Nationwide* project that mainly focus on the role audiences' class position in their interpretation strategies, Tania Modleski's "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Opera" (1979) that investigates the factor of gender in reading soap opera is another important early piece. It marked one of the first critical shifts of feminist media research toward attempting to understand why soap opera can appeal to women viewers, rather than simply condemning or victimizing them. Also

exploring the relationship between the popular culture text and its female readers, Radway's (1984) influential work *Reading the Romance* employs the reader-response theory and asked readers themselves to explore their reading motives, habits, and pleasure. Feminist scholars have, since the mid-1970s, tended to focus particularly on texts of women's genre and those which have key female protagonists. Key works here would include Julie D'Acci's (1994) *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey* and the important works on soap opera (Seiter et al. 1989; Ang 1985)

The issue of race has also gained research attention in cultural studies. Jacqueline Bobo's (1995) seminal work *Black Women as Cultural Readers* examines Black women's reception of the film based on *The Color Purple* by the Black female novelist, Alice Walkers, and indicates that their interpretations of the film vary from those of white women. Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis' (1992) study has also addresses the complex meanings of class intertwined with race produced by African American viewers of *The Cosby Show.* Similarly, Hunt (1997) demonstrates that African-American audiences were better able to critically assess and subsequently oppose the news interpretations of the Los Angeles riots than Caucasian audiences. More importantly, Hunt highlights that a critically oppositional reading is a refusal to accept that dominant ideologies embedded within a text, and therefore is a means of resistance. An oppositional reading of a text can represent awareness and possibly the first step towards action and social change, and thus has substantial significance on minority audiences' reading of mainstream texts.

In the nutshell, over the past twenty years, cultural studies research has expanded from examining the role of class (Morley 1980) to gender (Radway 1984; Morley 1986;

Press 1991) and race (Jhally and Lewis 1992; Hunt 1997) to illuminate audiences' reading of media texts. However, few studies or theories have focused on sexuality as an identity factor in framing audiences' meaning-making and choice of interpretation strategies.

## Queer Spectatorship

Although scholars have suggested that popular culture has always been a source of pleasure for lesbian and gay male audiences (MeKenna 2002), the relationship between lesbian and gay male audiences' interpretations of media texts, particularly the presumably heterosexual mainstream media texts, has just been explored in the emerging media scholarship on queer spectatorship.

### *Lesbian Reading*

In analyzing the mainstream femme films in the mid 1980s, such as *Personal Best*, that merges female friendship and lesbian sexuality, Holmlund (1991) and Ellsworth (1986) argue that these films appeal to both heterosexual and gay audiences and demonstrate how lesbians creatively read the ambiguous film narratives for illicit viewing pleasure. In "Fostering the Illusion: Stepping Out with Jodie," Clare Whatling (1994) also argues that lesbians have always found ways to read between the lines, projecting fantasies of desire and identification onto heterosexual narratives and mainstream female icons. She explores how a handful of films, with no obvious lesbian reference points, have been appropriated for a lesbian pleasure and desire as a result of what she terms "extra-textual information" available about the film star(s). Whether by rumor of gossip,

the belief that a particular actress, such as Jodie Foster, is a lesbian enables an appropriation of the films themselves.

In a similar vein, Yvonne Tasker's (1994) essay "Pussy Galore: Lesbian Images and Lesbian Desire in the Popular Cinema" examines how even the mostly apparently heterosexual films can be appropriated by the lesbian audiences. She explores the potential pleasures available for lesbians in films to suggest that lesbians can negotiate between various identification perspectives in their request for cinematic pleasure. Reina and Rolley (1996) also investigate lesbian viewers' reading and pleasure of British mainstream high fashion magazine, such as *Vogue, Elle, and Marie Claire*, to analyze the possible lesbian visual pleasures offered by fashion imagery in a field of cultural production that is understood to target an exclusively female (and overtly heterosexual) audience.

McKenna (2002) further asserts that lesbian viewers are savvy deconstructors who are accustomed to reading against-the-grain of textual hegemony to construct subcultural, resistive, or oppositional readings. She investigated lesbian fans' readings of the Fox network series, *Ally McBeal*, a program that is widely touted as geared toward the highly desirable heterosexual female audience. In her feminist cultural studies project, McKenna presents a cultural territory that is shared with and shaped by the lesbian fans. For the lesbian fans of *Ally McBeal*, the playful sexual liminality of the female characters carries a deviant pleasure and an experiential resonance. Participants described the overt lesbian visibility of *Ally McBeal*—long lingering looks and hot sexy kisses exchanged between female characters—as "an excessive and campy representational

acknowledgment of the lesbian audience" (p. 286-287). Some lesbian respondents discussed watching the program together as a special ritualistic event, whereas others reported making arrangements to exchange copies of *Ally* episodes that had lesbian content. The lesbian-implied images and narratives in the assumed heterosexual television text thus are transformed into cultural capital shared by lesbian fans to enhance communal ties.

*Gay Male Reading: Camp Sensibility*

Alexander Doty (1993, 2000) provides one of the most extensive frameworks of queer readings of mainstream media texts. Doty's (2000) queer readings of film classics, such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), and *Psycho* (1960) explore the "complex circumstances in texts, spectators, and production that resist easy categorization, but that definitely escape or defy the heteronormative" (p. 7). For example, in his essay on *The Wizard of Oz*, Doty provides a queer reading of Dorothy's fantastic journey as a young lesbian's search for identity, constantly negotiated between the gendered roles of the feminine (Aunt Em/Glinda the Good Witch) and the butch (Almira Gulch/the Wicked Witch of the West). Doty's lesbian reading brilliantly highlights the fluid and elusive queer readings positions that can escape even one's gender identity.

Another film scholar, Richard Dyer, also has written extensively about the unique gay male camp reading strategies. In "It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going," Dyer (2002) argues that "camp sensibility is one thing that expresses and confirms being a gay man" (p.49). He defines,

> the camp way of looking at things is a way of prising the form of something away from its content, of reveling in the style while dismissing the content as trivial. It demystifies by playing up the artifice by means of which such things as these retain their hold on the majority of the population (52).

Dyer (2002) further asserts that the traditional gay culture essentially refers to a distinct way of reading and enjoying culture, involving the pleasurable reading of both gay and non-gay products.

Similar to Dyer's note on the significance of camp reading on gay culture, Michael Bronski (1984) elaborates on "gay sensitivity" by stressing the importance of imagination. "Imagination is especially threatening to a culture that repressively and rigidly defines gender roles…because it can provide an alternative vision to the 'real' world" (p.41). Babuscio (1994) also describe how camp is used as a communication device within gay culture, as well as a weapon to deconstruct the heterosexual essentialism of straight culture.

In regards to gay male audiences' interpretations of mainstream media texts, Griffin (1998) provides historical evidence that the gay and lesbian reception to Disney in the 1930s and 1940s constitutes an alternative use of Disney to escape from oppression, to manage feelings, as well as to celebrate sexual difference. Griffin argues that gay audiences are able to ignore or skip the hoary clichés of heterosexual romance and focus on the "inventiveness or the imagined world that seems to hold out a promise of radical possibilities in viewing various Disney cartoons" (p. 68). Furthermore, Griffin suggests that in the early gay culture, re-shaping iconography from the hegemonic culture in a humorous, parodic fashion was a common strategy to facilitate communication within

gay communities under the ever-present eye of the heterosexual hegemony.

Scholars have suggested that gay and lesbian culture often relies on its camp reading strategies to appropriate texts from the dominant heterosexual hegemony. Hence, a sense of gay community and identity can be traced in part to an emphasis on reading—specifically on "poaching" straight texts. Gay culture has often been forged through sharing a unique appreciation of, for example, Judy Garland or classical opera (Dyer 2002; Griffin 1998). Consequently, such textual re-reading has often helped define an individual's gay identity, described by various scholars as a "gay sensibility."

The deconstruction or reconstruction of mainstream media texts for deviant pleasures is not unique to lesbian and gay audiences. In her analysis of the black female film spectator, bell hooks (1992) describes the deviant pleasure from interrogation through an oppositional reading. She argues that while the racism and sexism of mainstream films deter a pleasurable identification for many black women viewers, the experience of watching white mainstream films while 'on guard' can afford an alternative pleasure and power in making a reading against the grain (hooks 1992).

However, there are critical limitations to simply reading a text against the grain. Many critics have warned us that audience agency may be overstated and over-celebrated by neglecting the limits imposed on the reader (Morley 1992) and by downplaying the structuring power of media texts that often works to predispose audiences' readings. For example, Jhally and Lewis (1992) demonstrate that some African American audiences were unable to recognize the myth of the American dream embedded in *The Cosby Show*, the myth that propagates the illusion that anyone can become affluent if they work hard,

regardless of race.

More importantly, a central issue in audience reception research, the *identification* process in media consumption, has not been fully explored in research on queer spectatorship since most of the current understanding focuses on lesbian and gay male audiences' readings of presumably heterosexual media texts. In most studies exploring the relationship between popular media texts and gay audiences, queer pleasures are found to be derived in private and against the grain (Hamer and Budge 1994). Yet, the recent boom of gay visibility on mass media, such as the popularization of lipstick lesbians and fashionable gay men, potentially enables a more public consumption, for both the gay and the heterosexual mainstream audiences, and for a more direct recognition and identification process. Studies examining gay audiences' reading of the recent gay presentations in mass media are thus necessary.

As gay sensibility and camp reading, which enable gay and lesbian audiences to enjoy the subversive pleasure and sometimes an "insider reading" of media texts, are considered to be significant elements constituting the community, increasing gay visibility as well as the assimilation of gay subculture into the mainstream society may have unexpected consequences on gay audiences' reading strategies. In fact, Griffin (1998) reported that when discussing the "coming-out" episode of *Ellen*, some gay audiences preferred it when they were the privileged insiders who could read Ellen Morgan as a lesbian, while most heterosexual viewers could not, wanting to think their reading as a subversive gesture challenging the mainstream culture.

From the theoretical perspective, if the queer subtext is actually encoded as one of the multiple preferred meaning in the text, it becomes difficult to argue if such a gay reading is radical or subversive. In most media audience studies, the construction of non-dominant readings of texts has been conceptualized as an act of resistance. However, gay window advertising problematizes the notion of a single dominant or preferred meaning in media text and the assumed resistant nature of a non-dominant reading. In the case of gay window advertising, the potential for such resistance is co-opted within an overarching marketing and consumer culture ideologies, especially if the "preferred" reading is re-defined by gay audiences as the "privileged" reading (only they can detect the secret codes). Gay audiences' reading of the malleable gay window advertising thus provides an interesting case to Hall's encoding/decoding model. In addition, with marketers' increasing investment in gay marketing and gay advertising and gay consumers' growing awareness of the power of gay dollars, gay audiences may be predisposed to a certain reading position that make it "easier" or "more apparent" to read commercials through a gay sensibility. But when it becomes easier for only certain groups from the broader queer community, it is necessary to examine the implication behind this development.

# CHAPTER III

## RESEARCH APPRAOCH: A CULTURAL STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

Cultural Studies has linked communication, consumption and cultural transformation to identity through the analysis of both media texts and lived experiences (Muhammad 2003). In terms of method, the cultural studies perspective raises questions that emphasize qualitative and interdisciplinary modes of investigation. In particular, the combination of textual analysis with ethnography is proven to be a common and useful approach.

In the first part of this chapter, I present the research questions guiding the textual analysis of ninety two gay-referenced mainstream television commercials. In the second part, I provide the questions and methodological design for the thirty in-depth interviews with the GLBT participants. In the concluding part of this chapter, I discuss the issue of reflexivity to evaluate the role of the researcher in the field, a crucial element in qualitative research for understanding whose realities from whose perspective is captured.

**Textual Analysis**

To address the concerns raised in previous chapters, the following research questions served as the guidelines for analyzing the mainstream television commercials targeting the gay market.

(1) How are lesbians, gay men, bisexual and transgender people represented in gay-inclusive and gay-targeted television commercials?

(2) Which subgroups from the community are most commonly featured in GLBT-themed commercials?

(3) What are the common plots, iconography, and appeals that are used to present GLBT characters in advertising?

(4) How do GLBT-themed commercials conceptualize GLBT people in relation the dominant heterosexual culture and for what reason?

(5) What are the sociocultural and marketing ideologies that come to work in shaping these representations?

To answer these research questions, a textual analysis was employed in this dissertation and is presented in chapter four. Textual analysis has been widely used within the cultural studies tradition to uncover the preferred meanings encoded in a text. While the researcher's informed reading is not meant to represent the "true" or "correct" meaning of a text, it is useful for establishing a benchmark to better understand the audience's response (Hunt 1997). Specifically, this textual analysis was intended to show how gay consumers are accepted and conceptualized by marketers and how gay

advertising may work to define a gay consumer culture.

Instead of content analysis that is widely used in quantitative research to broadly survey and measure variables, the approach of textual analysis was used in this dissertation. While content analysis examines explicit, easily recognizable and clearly measurable factors, such as the number of people of color that appear in prime time advertising, textual analysis is more pertinent to study gay-referenced advertising texts, since gayness is often suggested or implied in ads through cultural symbols, ambiguous scenarios, as Miller (1991) argues that the representation of gayness is often constructed in "the shadow kingdom of connotation, where insinuations could be at once developed and denied" (p. 23). This is especially true in the category of gay window advertising. More importantly, while content analyses is useful in detecting trends and patterns among a large number of texts or to survey changes in media content over a long period of time, textual analysis often deals with a relative smaller number of texts, but seeks to get beneath the surface, the denotative meanings, to examine more implicit connotative symbolic meanings, through researcher's interpretation rather than systematic measuring. By uncovering the connotative meanings and the deeper social and marketing ideologies shaping these images and messages, we can come to understand how gay advertising can be pleasurable or empowering to gay consumers, through what semiotic tactics, which are the central concerns in this dissertation research.

Researchers have argued that spectator ethnographies must begin with a discussion of how audiences are constituted by ambient discourses and ideologies available in their social, cultural, and historic contexts. Highlighting the socially

constructed nature of an audience position and a textual ideal is the first step in recognizing that the relationship between audiences and media is always already mediated and negotiated. My textual analysis described how gay advertising created and promoted a homogenous "gay dream consumer" image for both GLBT consumers and mainstream culture. This textual construction of gayness, in turn, is likely to affect how gay audiences define themselves as gay consuming subjects.

Additionally, any interview project with media audiences has to be grounded in the researcher's familiarity with the media texts in study. An extended textual analysis will provide the first step for the researcher to identify and explain potential similarities and differences between textual and viewer values. It works to reveal the semiotic, social and cultural conditions which predispose audiences' interpretations of the media texts. Textual analysis is an important addition to interviews also because the researcher can identify issues that viewers take for granted and do not articulate which may nevertheless be in effect. It thus allows for the theorization and contextualization of the viewer. On a more theoretical level, while the polysemic nature of audience reception is a crucial element in cultural studies, there are always limits and constraints on the openness of any text. A textual analysis works to reveal the parameters and boundaries of audience decoding. My textual analysis drew on the literature of minority representation and Bourdieu's theorization of consumer tastes. Within the highly contested cultural space of advertising, I attempt to highlight the conflicts between various GLBT stereotypes and the recent creation of the gay dream consumer image and their underlying ideologies.

Therefore, an ideological textual analysis (Kellner 1995) is employed to uncover the ideological role of gay advertising. As Kellner (1995) argues, the analysis of ideology is central to cultural studies since "dominant ideologies serve to reproduce social relations of domination and subordination" (p. 7). Also emphasized in cultural studies is the multilayered oppression of sexuality, race, gender, and class which are closely intertwined in the interplay of power relations. Through an intersectional analysis, the complex ways that power relations and domination are encoded or embodied in gay advertising texts can then be observed.

The sample of gay-referenced television commercials for the North America market reviewed in this study was obtained from the online gay advertising archive of the CommercialCloset.com website, which belongs to the Commercial Closet Association, a non-profit educational and journalism organization that aims to "lessen social discrimination of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community by encouraging corporations and ad agencies to improve GLBT portrayals in mainstream advertising" (Wilke, commercialcloset.com). The online archive consisted of more than 3,000 GLBT-themed ads around the world, including 700 print ads and television commercials from the North American market. More importantly for this project, the ads are collected on the basis of explicit or implicit gay references that are identified, rated, and commented on by the Commercial Closet association staff. It is important to note that the sample collected from the Commercial Closet online archive was in no way complete or extensive, yet it provided extra validation to the queer references I intended to analyze.

Based on the Commercial Closet Associations' classification of positive, neutral, negative, and gay-vague advertising, the final sample of potentially gay-inclusive or gay-targeted commercials contained ninety-two television commercials produced by mainstream marketers in the North American market. The sample consisted of fifty-five out-of-closet commercials that featured explicitly gay characters, affectionate displays between same-sex couples, or support of issues in the gay rights movement. It also included thirty-seven gay window commercials in which gayness was only hinted at through symbolic references and ambiguous same-sex interactions. Each of the ninety-two commercials was replayed several times to identify patterns, common plots, and appeals for thematic coding. It is important to emphasize here that there existed little reliable information to verify whether or not the marketers intended to use the presented vague, neutral or affirmative GLBT portrayals to target or include GLBT consumers. In most cases, marketers would downplay their gay-themed advertising or provide equivocal responses for their gay-suggestive commercials on mainstream television in order to avoid direct backlash from anti-gay groups. Nonetheless, these commercials had been reported in marketing trade publications and identified by gay people, such as the staff at the Commercial Closet association, for the perceived queer references.

Information about the distribution of the commercials analyzed was gathered from the Commercial Closet Association website and various marketing trade publications. Based on the information available, most GLBT-explicit and clearly gay-targeted commercials were broadcast only in metropolitan areas, such as New York, Boston, and San Francisco. However, those commercials could reach far more GLBT

consumers who are outside of the ads' broadcast areas. These commercials are frequently discussed in both mainstream marketing trade publications and major gay magazines, distributed in GLBT cyber communities, and circulated through word-of-mouth. In particular, the Internet and websites like CommercialCloset.com which is linked to various major gay websites, such as Gay.com, has greatly affected GLBT consumers' access to gay-themed commercials. Many GLBT consumers thus often experience GLBT-explicit commercials outside of its conventional viewing context. Additionally, several participants reported that they had seen some of the GLBT-explicit commercials used in the audience reception study that were aired locally while those commercials were reported to be shown only in the metropolitan areas. It is important to emphasize here that the key concerns are not about the number of audiences these commercials could reach, or if my interview participants have seen these commercials prior to the study, but about how audiences are informed of gay advertising, in what social contexts they experience the texts, and their meaning-making of the actual distribution of these GLBT-explicit commercials. These questions are explored in an audience reception study.

**Audience Reception Study**

To explore the research concerns raised from the textual analysis, the following research questions were explored through an audience reception study.

(1) What are gay audiences' feelings, perceptions, attitudes, and opinions of the gay representations in gay-referenced commercials? And why?

(2) Can the viewer relate him or herself to the gay representations? If so, how?

(3) Which reading strategies (dominant, negotiated, oppositional) do gay audiences employ in processing the gay advertising messages?

(4) What issues, and particularly those related to their social identities, such as age, race, gender, social class, and political beliefs, emerge in their readings?

(5) Do GLBT audience members incorporate messages from gay advertising to define themselves in relation to the mainstream society? And if so, how?

To answer these research questions, qualitative methodology is chosen due to the exploratory nature of the questions raised. Audiences' meaning-making process can be best observed by the "depth" that qualitative methods and analysis can offer. Furthermore, understanding the nuances within in a discussion is best accomplished through analyzing the process and context through which it occurs (Dey 1993). Key characteristics of qualitative research include use of inductive reasoning where results are grounded in the data. The researcher serves as the research instrument because the study is based on observation, inference, explanation, description, and analysis on the part of researcher. The concern regarding the role of the researcher also leads to the other characteristics of qualitative inquiry: reflexive analysis, development of member knowledge, and situating of the study itself in a specific historic, social and geographic context.

*Sampling*

The main recruitment method was purposive sampling and snowball sampling, the most common sampling methods in qualitative research (Patton 1990). The purposive sampling approach is used when participants are chosen because they have particular features of characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central questions which the researcher intends to study (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). In order to capture the diversity of the local queer community, GLBT participants from different backgrounds of race/ethnicity, age, and profession were purposely recruited. Snowball sampling that involves asking personal contacts to ask their personal contacts to be interviewed constituted a key recruitment method. One strength of snowball sampling was its efficiency in finding participants whose attributes are central to the research problem (Lindlof 1995). Another advantage of using snowballing in this dissertation is that as a foreign and an Asian researcher, I did not have direct access to various local social networks. Through snowballing, I was able to access a broader social network through friends and acquaintances. An added benefit was that contacts often vouched for my research intentions and explained my study to people who might be interested and helped reach out to more participants.

I purposively included voices from the understudied bisexual and transgender members. Additionally, while it is Caucasian gay men and lesbians who are the target consumers of most gay advertising and who are the majority of the local queer community, Black, Latino, and Asian GLBT members was purposively recruited to capture the diversity within the local queer community. In particular, recruitment emails

was sent to the listserv of university queer student organizations, women's and gender studies, the LGBTQ/Sexualities Research Cluster to recruit participants from the Queer UT community.

The sample included thirty participants whose ages ranged from eighteen to fifty-three. Participants came from different professions, including students, computer engineers, business professionals, musicians, police officers, and social workers. Most participants shared a middle-class family background or social position. Among the eight gay male participants, four were Caucasian, one Jewish, one African American, two Asian American, and three Mexican American. Among the fourteen lesbian participants, six were Caucasian, three African American, four Asian American, and one Mexican American. I also interviewed one bisexual man, one bisexual woman, two female-to-male transgender men, and one gender-queer individual who rejected identification with the gender and sexual dichotomy. It is important to clarify here that although my audience reception study focuses on the role of sexual identity in GLBT audience's readings of gay advertising texts, I do not assume participants' responses to the commercials shown are linked primarily to their GLBT identity. In fact, the analysis of participants' dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings aims to investigate how GLBT audiences negotiate the same texts using differently prioritized identity factors including gender, race, class, religion, political beliefs, and subgroup identity of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender.

While I did not attempt to create a sample that mirrored the demographics of the local GLBT communities, the diversified backgrounds of participants reflected the community's heterogeneity. The interviews were used as a means of exploring issued

salient to gay, lesbian, and particularly, the underresearched bisexual and transgender audiences, rather than representing them as a whole or as a homogenous group. It was also impossible to identify a wholly representative sample since many GLBT individuals, as a marginalized population, would prefer to remain unidentified. More importantly, my objective was not to provide generalizable results based on a representative sample to demonstrate a single capitalized Truth, but to capture the multiple constructed realities in specific historic, geographic, and social contexts. The theoretical implications of this dissertation may be transferable to other social minorities in a similar context, especially those who are also caught in the struggles of stereotype/positive representation and assimilation/confrontation.

*Design*

Respondent interview, which is widely adopted in audience reception research to study how individuals read the "the codes of ideologies, class, gender, and race in popular texts," (Lindlof 1995, p.172) was used in this dissertation. Respondent interview resembles the traditional survey in its use of a set of standardized interview questions and relatively high content comparability. However, the interviews questions were primarily used as guidelines to ensure central subjects to be covered. Especially, the key distinction between an interview study and a survey is the opportunity in face-to-face interviews for immediate feedbacks from participants. Not only can the researcher clarify certain questions but also have the opportunity to *probe* answers by asking participants to explicate or expand on a specific response. Additionally, the interviews were semi-structured as respondents were free to answer or not to answer the questions, and were

encouraged to expound their own notions of what was important for the researcher to know, and to talk about any issues that they felt relevant to the topic. Allowing the interview conversation to depart from the script resulted in a more naturalistic experience which led to richer data.

In the interview introduction, I explained my academic background as a doctoral student in advertising. I introduced myself as a queer-identified researcher when interviewing non-acquaintance participants. I then explained my research interests in media representations of minorities as the main research motivation, but also included my curiosity about GLBT audiences' responses to the newly developed gay advertising strategy which contrasted my experience with the Taiwanese GLBT communities where no gay niche market existed. I emphasized my role as a foreigner researcher who might not be familiar with their growing-up experiences and the GLBT culture in the US, in order to request my participants to provide thick descriptions and detailed examples. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, signed informed consent forms for the interview, and were promised anonymity.

Even though my original intention was to conduct only individual interviews, I welcomed two opportunities in which I interviewed a couple and a pair of friends. Participants' conversations and debates with each other provided rich information and interesting perspectives to the study. The interview began with questions regarding participants' personal and family backgrounds, their relationship and identification with the GLBT communities, their experiences with growing up and coming out, their media usage and preferences. In the later part of the interview, selected commercials were

shown to the participants in an order that followed our conversation. The commercials used in the audience reception study were selected based on the ad's characterization of gay window or out-of-closet commercials. In particular, a few commercials that were frequently discussed in marketing trade publications, including the ads of IKEA, John Hancock financial service, Volkswagen, and the Subaru ad that featured Martina Navratilova were included in the audience study. Each participant watched a similar set of commercials, including ads of every GLBT group. The standardized set of ads helped to better capture constructed self-identities in relation to other members of the GLBT community. However, the order of ad-showing was customized to reflect the participant's individual GLBT or queer identity and to follow the discussion flow. Participants and I watched the commercials together from the Commercial Closet websites using my or their own laptop computers.

I was aware of the unrealistic and unnatural social and media context in which commercials were viewed in this audience reception study. Yet, as various scholars have suggested, the Internet has become the key information source and communication channel for the GLBT communities (McDaniel 2006). Some even argue that GLBT people's participation on the Internet has changed the socialization practices in the communities (Schneider 2006). Various participants commented on their reliance on the Internet for information on community events, GLBT-related news, as well as on gay marketing reports. Therefore, some participants might be more accustomed to watching video clips online.

After watching each commercial, participants were asked to discuss their immediate feelings, interpretations of the ad characters, especially in relation to how the images and ad narratives fit in or against how they see themselves and the GLBT community. We also discussed if the ad images were similar or different to what they usually saw in mass media, popular culture, and general social perception of the GLBT communities. Some probing questions regarding the commercials' social implications in relation to the current agenda and direction of the gay rights movement were raised, followed by a discussion of their own opinions on the gay rights movement and the definition of queer culture. The interview protocol and the list of commercials shown to the participants are shown in Appendix A and B.

In-depth interviews were conducted from November of 2005 to March of 2006. All interviews were held in coffee houses that were suggested by participants or that I knew were gay-friendly. The interviews lasted from one hour to two hours, including the time that the participants and I watched the selected TV commercials together. The interviews were audio recorded by a digital voice recorder with a clip-on microphone. The number of commercials watched during interviews ranged from eight to thirteen, depending on the interview length and participants' responses.

*Analysis*

All the interviews were transcribed and coded thematically through a manual procedure (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Participant's interpretive narratives were broken down into numerous chunks of texts, and were compared, matched, and assigned to a few initial tentative categories and further analyzed for discovering patterns, themes, and key

issues. The process of discovering patterns and interrelated themes required a time-consuming method of continuously re-reading the data and constantly readjusting and redefining existing categories to accommodate more emerging themes. Participants' identity narratives and their interpretations were further integrated to contextualize their readings. Specifically, by relating, matching, and contrasting participants' various interpretations against the "dominant meanings" discussed in the textual analysis, participants' choice of dominant, negotiated, or oppositional decoding strategies can be illuminated. Patterns, themes, and key issues that emerge from their identity narratives and interpretations will be further analyzed to understand the media texts' structuring influence—how media texts can work to predispose a viewer to one interpretation rather than another—as well as its limitations and exceptions. Furthermore, participants' agency, subjectivity, and their personalization, customization, and improvisation of the meanings of the media texts can be contextualized. In essence, the textual analysis and audience reception interviews work to inform each other and to demonstrate audiences' active and negotiated readings of discourses on gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity that are available in the advertising texts.

*Trustworthiness*

Prolonged engagement, triangulation and member check were used in this dissertation to ensure the study credibility and trustworthiness. Prolonged engagement was the investment of sufficient time to learn about the culture and to build trust. In order to acquaint myself with the local GLBT community at the UT and at the city of Austin, I have been participating in several GLBT student organizations. I attended the social

meetings of She Says which was a student organization that aims to provide a healthy, friendly, and social atmosphere for lesbians, bisexuals, and questioning women of UT. I was a board member of Trikine Tejas which was a pan Asian queer-straight alliance organization for the 2004 academic year. To stepping outside of the UT queer community, I also volunteered for the 2005 AGLIFF (Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival), attended games of the Gay Softball League, and met people through Foodies events which was a weekly social gathering for "women who love women who love food." To further explore the gay business state in the context of local GLBT community, I worked with the Austin Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce through the graduate course "Community Engagement" in spring 2006. I attended their monthly meetings where I socialized with their members and helped them design a community survey.

For the purpose of data triangulation, I also interviewed three heterosexual participants who responded to my recruitment emails and identified themselves as allies. In this case, triangulation was not used for data validation but for contrasting perspectives to better my interviews with GLBT participants, as Lindlof (1995) suggests that triangulation involves "a comparative assessment of more than one form of evidence about an object of inquiry" (p. 239). In addition, Patton (1990) argues that triangulation not only provides diverse ways of looking at the same phenomenon but also adds to the research credibility by strengthening confidence in the conclusions. Triangulation was achieved through the triangulation of sources, methods, and theories. Specifically, the triangulation of sources was ensured by recruiting not only gay male, lesbian, but also bisexual and transgender participants of different ages, ethnicities, and professional

backgrounds. The triangulation of methods was done through the combination of textual analysis and interviews. The triangulation of theories came from the interdisciplinary theoretical framework including consumer culture theory and reception theory.

At last, the member check method, which has been considered to be the most crucial technique for establishing credibility in qualitative studies (Lindlof 1995), was used in this dissertation for further confirmation, verification, and clarification. Except for the three participants who were recruited through personal contacts and therefore, whose email addresses were not recorded, most transcriptions of interview conversations were emailed back to participants one month to two months after the interview. Unfortunately, due to the prolonged follow-up transcription email, only a few participants replied. Some provided more information on gay marketing and gay advertising.

However, one male participant, Will, changed his opinion of gay advertising in his reply. During the interview, Will expressed a general welcoming attitude towards having advertising designed for the communities. In his reply email, he contradicted his previous appreciative viewpoint and argued that gay advertising may further divide the GLBT communities from the heterosexual mainstream and essentialize gay difference. Hence, after a second thought, he became hesitant to support this marketing strategy. His arguments during the interview and in the later responses were both equally valid and significant. Will's self-contradiction only illuminates that one's variable reading positions are always subjective to specific social and historic contexts.

*Reflexivity: Role of the Researcher*

Press (1996) asserts that researchers need to place more than just the study in a sociological context, but also their own position through reflexivity. Reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher's influence on the construction of meanings throughout the research process. Considering the dialectic nature of in-depth interviews and the open quality of qualitative research, both the researcher and the participant might influence each other during or after the research process. Reflexivity thus helps to reveal the researcher's perspective through which the contextualized meanings in research are constructed.

The choice of topic and population are rooted in my concerns about addressing sociocultural concerns about popular culture, of which social minorities are often central. It has been my experience that minority groups often have more critical perspectives about culture and society, while maybe being sensitive and susceptible to representations in mass media catering to them.

In the interview context, I positioned myself as a "friendly stranger" (Cotteril 1992) who does not have control or power over the participants as our relationship existed mainly for the interview through their voluntary participation. Participants had partial control over the interview conversation as they chose what questions to answer and how to answer, and they were encouraged to discuss any related subjects. Additionally, positioning myself as a stranger, rather attempting to be "a new friend", allowed me to ask probing questions that sometimes contradicted their arguments more easily.

In a related vein, I retained self-disclosure by focusing self-introduction on my research interests, in order to avoid framing participants' perceptions and used the academic-sounding position of "queer-identified" researcher to describe myself. I acknowledged the dilemma between building intimacy through the researcher's self-disclosure or increasing the researcher's vulnerability for interrogation and aggravating impacts on participant's responses. Yet, the interview framing of an academic research also made me wonder to what extent, if any, a participant might have articulated critical analysis or criticism to satisfy the perceived critical criteria of academic research.

My role as a foreign, non-Caucasian researcher was likely to have critical impacts on participants' responses in the interview study. I could not be certain of the role of my ethnicity in influencing some participants' comparisons between the GLBT communities and ethnic minorities. On realizing my role as a foreign researcher, some participants may have further capitalized on their American identity as in some cases, the differences between American culture and other cultures were noted.

My gender identity was clearly reflected in my sample composition as nearly half of my participants were lesbians and all the transgender participants were female-to-male, one of whom I knew before his transition. This gender imbalance directly resulted from my snowballing sampling, as most of my personal contacts are female. The recruitment emails sent to the Women's and Gender Studies have also likely helped me recruited more female participants.

# CHAPTER IV

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATIONS OF GAY MEN, LESBIANS, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN GAY ADVERTISING

Gross (2001) argues that being included in advertising is the ultimate recognition that American society can bestow. Indeed, advertising, as a powerful force and strategy of modern capitalism, often reflects and enhances the social ideologies that it selectively endorses. At the same time, advertising is a cultural terrain contested by ideological discourses in the free-market system and is constantly evolving in response to the shifting power relations between social groups. The advertising industry as a media institution witnesses the conflicts between various profit demands and potentially contradictory social values and gay rights politics. The development of gay advertising becomes a negotiated discourse and opens up possibilities for sexual and gender minorities to exercise (economic) power in the marketplace and to resist heterosexist domination, as "cultural forms are sites in which different subjectivities struggle to impose or challenge, to confirm, negotiate or displace, definitions and identities" (Gledhill 1988, p. 72).

In this chapter, I first examine the common advertising strategies targeting gay consumers—gay window advertising and out-of-closet advertising—to illuminate how queerness is encoded in gay advertising texts, how queerness is defined through consumption ideologies, and how advertising constructs subject positions, and toward what ends. After examining the strategies used to reach GLBT consumers, I present a

detailed analysis of advertising representations of individual subgroups of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people and of the ideologies at work in shaping the selective representations.

Among the ninety-two gay-themed television commercials produced by mainstream marketers in the American market, fifty-three were gay-male focused, fourteen were lesbian-themed, three were bisexuality-themed, and fourteen showed "neutral" or "positive" representations of drag queens or male-to-female transgender people, based on the rating of the Commercial Closet association. Except two commercials, most gay-referenced ads reviewed were produced and aired after 1995 while the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy is instituted for the U.S. military in 1993. After the year of 2000 when Vermont became the first state in the United States to legally recognize civil unions between gay or lesbian couples, there has been a steady increase in the number of gay-themed commercials.

In terms of product categories, most GLBT-themed ads were produced by automotive, fashion/apparel, alcohol and non-alcoholic beverages marketers. To be more specific, the sample of thirty-seven gay window commercials included twenty-eight gay male-referenced and eight lesbian-suggestive commercials, in addition to one ad that presented ambiguous grouping including both males and females. Nearly one third of gay window commercials were produced by automotive companies while marketers from the categories of fashion, food, financial services and beverages were also presented. It is important to note that the representation of bisexuality, which was often signified through characters' sexual interests in both sexes, and of transgenderism, which involved

"deviant" gender identity, were overtly GLBT-related and thus not represented in the category of gay window advertising. In terms of the sample of fifty out-of-closet commercials, twenty-five commercials were gay male-focused, six were lesbian-referenced, and all three bisexuality- and transgenderism-themed commercials fell into this category. The key marketers represented in out-of-closet commercials came from the product categories of personal grooming products, fashion, financial service, alcohol, and non-alcoholic beverages. In general, the heavy concentration of gay-themed advertising in the product categories of luxurious automotive brands, fashion, alcohol, travel, and financial services reflects the marketing construction of a lifestyle and consumption-oriented gay identity and gay consumer culture, which is analyzed in the following textual analysis and verified in an audience reception study in Chapter V and VI.

**Gay Window Advertising**

Homosexuality is often suggested by characters' "deviant" gender performance as many gay men and lesbians are discriminated against not only because of the perceived abnormal sexual orientation, but also because of their unconventional gender behaviors. When writing about queer representations in mainstream commercially produced films, Dyer (1993) indicates that certain formulaic gay plots, such as childlessness, a man's interests in arts or domestic crafts, and a woman's interests in mechanics or sports, are standard strategies of suggesting gayness:

> We recognize these men are gay because we see aspects of them as in some sense feminine…the majority of gay stereotypes signify gay sexuality through signs that have gender connotations (p. 31).

Similarly, most ads that feature easily identifiable gay characters, *but may not actually be targeting gays*, often portray gender-related stereotypes, such as sissy gay men and drag queens. Male homosexuality is usually implied in ads through heightened effeminacy or interests in domestic activities. For instance, in a 2002 Bud Light commercial, two gay men are identified through their dramatic and effeminate hand gestures, high-pitched voices, giggling, and comments on a cute little puppy: "Oh my gosh! That is the cutest little puppy! Oh you should dress him up, put him in some cute little outfit." The two gay characters are shown in scarlet tight tank-tops and wearing necklaces, in contrast to the rugged looking straight male character who is in a loose shirt and pants and has a low and masculine voice.

In contrast, "gay window advertising" (Bronski 1984), which is the earliest and the most common strategy targeting gays, is carefully designed to avoid explicit gay references including gay stereotypes. The term "gay window advertising" is probably adapted from Judith Williamson's (1979) description of conscious "absences" in ads that she labels a "window." According to Williamson, "these windows" allow readers to "decipher…the surface (and) 'break through' to the 'hidden' meaning" (p. 77).

Due to its ambiguous and potentially tantalizing appeal, gay window advertising has become common practice in clothing, cologne and liquor ads since the early 1980s (Griffin 1998; Chasin 2000; Sender 2004). One could find coded gay messages in numerous campaigns, including Poco Rabanne's Pour Homme cologne print ads showing a man speaking to his gender-unspecific lover over the phone, Tangueray Gin's fictional spokesperson Mr. Jenkins, as well as the sexualized male bodies displayed on Calvin

Klein underwear billboards.

It is important to note that gay window advertising operates on the assumption that the social and cultural constitution of viewers, such as class, age, gender, personal history—and for gay window advertising particularly—sexuality, affects the reading and pleasure of a text. Compared to heterosexual audiences who are unfamiliar with queer culture, it is more likely for GLBT audiences to produce gay readings from gay window texts because GLBT audiences have been practicing reading-against-the-grain, or resistant readings, since their adolescence, as they were growing up with little explicit queer representations in mass media. Yet, it is important to note that viewing and reading as a social practice varies between individuals and historical periods. Even gay window advertising, which is designed to increase the possibility of gay readings by GLBT audiences, does not necessarily guarantee a gay reading. This is especially true given the fact that the GLBT community is far from homogenous, but instead is highly diverse in terms of race, gender, age, class, religion, political agenda, and stage of coming out.

To induce gay readings from GLBT audiences, gay window advertising often features “average,” “normal” and straight-looking characters of same sex who can be read as buddies or roommates by straight audiences and as gay couples by gays. This advertising strategy tries to appeal to lesbian and gay consumers without offending, or even alerting, homophobic audiences. Kahn (1994) outlines several tactics used in print advertising to elicit possible gay readings, including portraying a single person instead of a heterosexual couple, showing no people in the visuals, and using androgynous images. Through the use of gay subtexts that include in-group language, gestures, and symbols of

gay subculture, an ad is able to appear "innocuous" to heterosexual audiences and induce a gay reading from gay audiences.

Through my textual analysis of gay window television commercials, subtle touching and physical proximity with ambiguous same-sex groupings were found to be the most common strategies to induce gay viewers to generate gay readings. Non-conventional gender behaviors and settings, such as men discussing oatmeal cereals in a kitchen, and ambiguous same-sex bonding which could be read as a friendship by straight audiences or a romantic relationship by gays, were encoded to offer multiple positions of identifications.

A good example of gay window advertising is a 1997 Volkswagen commercial which features two hip young men, one African American and one Caucasian, who salvage a discarded chair and place it in the back of their vehicle as they drive around aimlessly. The characters could be read as roommates, buddies, or partners, especially considering the fact that it was first aired during the much publicized coming-out episode of *Ellen*, an expensive spot that charged advertisers twice the normal rate. In another example of gay window advertising, a 1997 Quaker Toasted Oatmeal commercial, two guys are shown having breakfast and discussing oatmeal cereals in the kitchen, which is not the conventional arrangement in traditional advertising. The nature of their relationship is never specified through their interactions but "there are nuances in how they interact with each other that is uncommon among straight guys," indicated by the staff of the Commercial Closet Association (commercialcloset.com).

Similarly, lesbian window advertising involves ambiguous relationships between female characters in ads. In a 1996 Kmart commercial that features Penny Marshal and Rosie O'Donnell, who was not out at that time, Penny expresses amazement at the low price of a bracelet. “Kmart--who knew?” “I knew,” replies Rosie. “You never said anything,” said the other woman with a curious tone. “What else are you not telling me?” “Tons of stuff,” answers Rosie. “Like what?” “That thing.” “LAST YEAR?” The dialogue between Rosie and Penny remains confusing to the audiences, which further tantalizes the viewers and invites them to question the nature of their relationship. Another example is a 2002 Zyrtec allergy medicine commercial, in which two average-looking women sit very close to each other as they address the camera and appear to be intimately involved. Their relationship is unclear and “they don't look enough alike to be siblings or family” (Wilke, commercialcloset.com).

As suggested by advertising scholars, the ambiguity appeal has been experimented with in advertising. Some advertising meanings are deliberately opaque to induce audiences’ higher involvement with the message (Willimanson 1978; Ritson and Elliot 1999). Ritson and Elliot (1999) indicate that consumers gain pleasure from decoding or making sense of ads. Lannon (1985) also observes that consumers expect advertising to provide aesthetic, emotional or intellectual rewards. In the case of gay window advertising, gay audiences may enjoy the pleasures of recognizing secret queer codes and ambiguous scenarios inviting their imaginations. In contrast to most heterosexual audiences who may be unaware of an alternative reading, gay audiences are more likely to be aware of the possibility of multiple meanings in the text, in addition to

their “preferred” gay reading. Gay window texts invite gay consumers to actively and creatively personalize the ad meaning for pleasure and for fulfilling identification needs. Gay consumers thus are offered a media text that they can customize relatively easily to fit their life experiences, personal history, and specific beliefs about their own range of identity possibilities (Hirshman and Thompson 1997). In this way, gay window advertising may seduce gay audiences with negotiated pleasures and might consequently acknowledge GLBT audiences’ unique queer reading strategy.

However, when commenting on the unique campy subculture for gay men, Dyer (2002) argues that “campy sensitivity is very much a product of our oppression” (p. 59) as gay men’s campy sensitivity is a result of their experiences of passing as straight, of disguising, and of appearing to fit in. Similarly, gay window advertising that only secretly and ambiguously acknowledges and entertains gay audiences may become a glass closet, or the “closet of connotation” (Doty 1993). By being addressed through gay window advertising, gay audiences are told that they are appreciated but that they must remain closeted. Lesbians and gay men are seen but not recognized by the mainstream society. These important questions were investigated in my audience reception study and the results are presented in Chapter V.

**Out-of-Closet Advertising**

When Bronski published *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sexuality* in which he coined the term gay window advertising in 1984, gay window advertising represented virtually the only appeal to the gay market in mainstream venues. Today, with the increasing visibility of lesbians and gay men in entertainment and mass media such as in popular shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and mainstream Hollywood films like the widely acclaimed *Brokenback Mountain*, explicit and even affirmative representations of lesbians and gay men appear more frequently, especially in certain product categories such as entertainment, fashion and alcohol that tend to have more edgy and unconventional advertising.

Induced by the gay marketing discourse on the power of the gay dollar, several adventurous advertisers choose a rather daring strategy to reach their gay consumers, explicitly in the hope of winning their loyalty. Different from the ambiguous appeal of gay window texts, out-of-closet advertising offers a clear position of identification for GLBT viewers by presenting out GLBT characters, showing affectionate displays between same-sex couples, and supporting issues in the gay rights movement, such as the much publicized agenda of gay marriage and gay adoption rights.

In 1994, one year after the “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” policy that permitted gays to serve in the military but banned homosexual activity, IKEA offered the first commercial that frankly dealt with a gay relationship in the US. Unsurprisingly, this ad generated numerous controversies in marketing discourses, even though it was broadcast only in a few regions for a very short period of time. This ad features a white, upper-middle class

gay male couple shopping for a dining room table together. The ad shows the gay male characters—who have been together for three years—commenting on their relationship and commitment to each other, and ends by showing them having dinner on the new table in a nicely decorated apartment. It is probably the most acclaimed gay-explicit commercial for its positive presentation of gay people. The marketer explained that this ad is part of a “diversity” campaign that deals with various non-traditional families, including single-parent families.

It is important to note that the “diversity” appeal is a common strategy that allows advertisers to include gays in their message or advertising campaigns, and is sometimes used as a strategy to dilute the tension resulting from targeting gays. Yet, gay people, along with other “diverse” segments, are presented in an ad often without interacting with each other. In this strategy, gayness is treated as a non-issue and gay people are suggested to be “just like everybody else.” For example, in a 2004 T-Mobile “Couples Talk Free” commercial, a gay male couple is tucked in the series of other angry couples terrified by their cell phone bills, although the gay male couple is the only couple that isn't shown twice, and they only appear for a fraction of a second.

Most out-of-closet advertisements appealed to individualism for a daring image. In a 1996 non-alcohol beverage “Mistic” commercial, produced by the same agency that made the famous IKEA ad, a cute young white woman declares to the camera “Mom, Dad, if you are watching, I want you to know I’ve finally found the person I want to spend the rest of my life with. Mom, Dad, this is Jenn.” Jenn then steps forward into the frame and smiles. The tagline "Show Your Colors" then appears at the end of the

commercial. This brand appeared to target a relatively younger consumer demographic, and its ads emphasized individualism and unusual allusions to the controversial issue of homosexuality. Another example that used the individualistic appeal was the 1998 Virgin Cola ad, which was the first commercial in the US to show two men kissing. In this Virgin Cola commercial that only aired in New York, LA and San Francisco, two middle-aged white men, dressed in tuxedos are being married by a female priest. Not surprisingly, at least one station in each of those progressive cities declined to run the commercial (Wilke, commercialcloset.com). This commercial was a part of the "Say Something" campaign for Virgin Cola, a brand that also appeals to a daring image. It is important to note that in the commercials explicitly targeting gay and lesbian consumers, fewer traditional gay stereotypes, such as sissy gay men, were presented. GLBT characters were not shown in peculiar settings, wearing flamboyant clothes, or talking in a certain theatrical manner. Same-sex relationships were treated like a norm in the ad story. Yet, these "straight-looking" gay representations also have been criticized for their blandness and lack of gay tastes (Wilke 2002).

**Representation of Gay Male Dream Consumers**

Similar to the findings from previous studies concerning gay representations in print ads, I also found that the subgroup of GLBT people that was used as representative in the gay-referenced television commercials reviewed was the white, upper-middle class *males*. The consequence of identity-based marketing is that it has a tendency to focus on the prosperous white man as the representative homosexual, since the social dominance of whiteness and maleness leaves the gay part of their identity as the most salient.

Although the ads explicitly targeting gays can subvert stereotypes by portraying gays like "normal" people, namely, the heterosexual mainstream, those "positive" gay images have been criticized for offering a counterproductive version of gay visibility that perpetuates the "dream consumer" stereotype (Chasin 2000; Clarkson 2005; Sender 2004).

For instance, the stereotype of the ideal gay consumer as "white and middle-class" may hinder many GLBT people of color from affirming their sexual and gender identity since they may not be able identify with the predominantly white gay image promoted in advertising, implicated as it is with racism in the mainstream society as well as the gay community. In writing about black gay men, Icard (1986) believes that many blacks view homosexuality as a white phenomenon irrelevant to the interests of the black community, and thus, this aggravates homophobia in African American communities. Additionally, gay marketing discourses often compare the gay and lesbian community with other ethnic minorities and argue that the gay niche market may constitute the most affluent minority groups in the United States. Implicit in these arguments is the assumption that the gay men and lesbians are predominantly white, and that other ethnic minorities are predominant heterosexual; this assumption completely embodies the multifaceted oppression that many queer people of color have to resist.

Different from the previously stigmatized definition of homosexuality that used to be classified as criminal by the state, as immoral by the religion, and as mentally ill by the science of psychology (Gross 2001), the recent gay male image promoted in the gay advertising discourse is a confident, savvy, financially secured "guppie" (the gay yuppie) with refined tastes. The popularity of the trendy gay man image can be demonstrated with

the concentration of fashion, personal grooming, and design-related product categories in gay advertising. Gay male characters are often presented as "taste" experts, such as hair stylists or fashion designers, in advertising and use their sophisticated tastes to endorse the product advertised.

Bourdieu's (1984) theorization of class identity and consumer tastes can shed insights to the recent celebratory construction of the gay male dream consumer image and their high-end tastes. Bourdieu argues that individual tastes and preferences are socially produced by social practices and more importantly, the individual's position within society. According to Bourdieu, consumer choices and tastes are not arbitrary or eccentric individual preferences. Instead, they reflect class-specific training resulting from a person's upbringing and education. Therefore, a person's tastes constitute a marker of his or her class position (Thornton 1996). In the consumption field, tastes are most frequently enunciated through image-related consumption practices, encapsulated by the "Fab Five" on the popular makeover reality show, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

As an article titled "Luxe Life" in Marketing News reports, "Long known as a population with disposable income and expensive taste, GLBT consumers still prefer name brands, like to indulge themselves, and actively seek product upgrades" (*Marketing News*, Oct. 28, 2002, p. 8), gayness in the marketing discourse has been increasingly defined by high-end tastes and vanity consumption. The construction of gayness through consumer tastes can be further illuminated in the IKEA commercial that features a gay male couple. In the ad, they explicitly comment on each other's tastes of furniture, and their purchase of a new dining table together is used to symbolize their committed

relationship. Thus, the image of gay men as stylish savvy consumer elites promoted by gay advertising has increasingly redefined gayness in the cultural landscapes of gay representations.

**Representation of Lipstick Lesbians**

In contrast to the visibility of gay men in advertising, lesbians in TV commercials are clearly underrepresented. Among the commercials I reviewed, lesbian-referenced ads account for only about one fourth of the gay window TV commercials, and one tenth of the out-of-closet commercials. Danae Clark (1993) explains that because lesbians as a social group have not been economically powerful nor easily identifiable and accessible, they have not been attractive to advertisers. As scholars have argued, the history of the gay niche market and gay advertising is largely about white, middle-class gay men, and so is the case of gay publications (Sender 2004). For example, the national gay publications, like *Advocate*, mainly appeal to gay male readers, and so do its advertisers. Until the late 1990s, most of the lesbian press had virtually no access or appeal to mainstream advertisers (Chasin 2000). While the readers of gay men-oriented publications are disproportionately white and affluent gay men, the readers of lesbian press are overwhelmingly feminists who have a long history of anti-capitalism (Stein 1989).

While gay men are predominantly presented through the “while, upper-middle class, trendy” dream consumer stereotype, the depictions of lesbians also demonstrate a skewed definition of gayness in advertising. Clark (1993) suggests a possible increase in lesbian window advertising in print media, particularly in fashion magazines, which is

designed to elicit lesbian reading using “the high-style butch” image (p. 190) and models’ subtle butch/femme role playing. However, Clark’s “high-style butch” image was not found in mainstream TV commercials. The only two lesbian characters that somewhat resembled the high-style butch image in the commercials reviewed were the out lesbian celebrities, tennis player Martina Navratilova and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres. Most lesbian images in mainstream television commercials were not identified through cultural signs in the lesbian subculture or non-normative gender performance, but largely through sexual tensions between feminine looking women.

In a 1996 Clothestime commercial set in the ladies’ room at a club, a sexy blonde woman steps in as another sexy woman is fixing her makeup in front of the mirror. In the background, there are sounds of a growling tiger, as the newcomer checks out the other woman, then says, “I like your dress.” She says "thanks", but then the newcomer emphasizes again in a clearly flirtatious tone, “No, I mean I *really* like your dress.” The explicit display of female same-sex desire is noteworthy. Scholars have argued that the sexualized “lipstick lesbians” (Richart et al. 1999) objectifies lesbians in the same manner as that of straight women. The flirtatious lesbian erotica in advertising might have little to do with lesbianism per se and instead “mirror those women engaged in lesbian sex in mainstream heterosexual pornography” (Richart et al. 1999, p. 124) as a common narrative device for heterosexual titillation.

**Representation of Adventurous Bisexuals**

In stark contrast to images of gay men and lesbians, bisexuality is almost a non-issue in advertising. Among the nearly one hundred TV commercials I reviewed, there were only three commercials dealing with bisexuality. In a 2001 Amstel Light ad, a charming blonde woman is sitting in the middle of her male and female friends at a table having a good time. Suddenly, the woman looks surprised as the camera pans below the table, showing the man and the woman sitting on each side caressing her knees. The woman then smiles to both of them as she feels truly flattered by both of her suitors. The narrator then announces, “At Amstel Light, we believe in having the best of both worlds...especially when it comes to beer.” Although this ad could be appreciated for its straightforward and non-judgmental approach to bisexuality, it might be designed to appeal to straight men’s fantasy of lesbians and bisexual women, and the ultimate goal of a ménage-a-trois.

Another commercial that features bisexual women is a 2000 Jolt Cola ad in which a young couple is seen in a convertible at a make out point overlooking the city. The girl asks, “I want you to be totally honest with me. When we kiss, do you ever, you know, fantasize that I'm somebody else?” He looks over at his girlfriend and she morphs into a sexy woman in his fantasy. “No,” he says, “when we kiss, you're always just...you.” As she takes a swig of the cola, she innocently says, “I just wanted to know.” She then looks over at the guy and also turns him into a sexy woman in her fantasy, seemingly the same sexy woman that her boyfriend fantasized, and thus, this again suggests the possibility of ménage-a-trois.

As can be seen in both the Amstel Light and Jolt Cola commercials, bisexuality is often conceptualized in advertising through the language of adventure, hedonism, openness, and chic. However, in stark contrast to Amstel Light's tagline "having the best of both worlds," most bisexual people can hardly think of themselves as having it all in the sense of an easy life. Fearing of isolation or ostracization by both the heterosexual and queer communities, many bisexual people may remain closeted in both communities.

**Representation of Transgender People**

The representation of another marginalized minority, transgender people, was even more problematic. The only type of transgender/transsexual people presented in commercials was the male-to-female transgender person who was often shown in an extremely sexy and feminine manner in order to serve up a surprising twist: "She is a He!" The surprisingly large number of male-to-female transgender people and flamboyant drag queens depicted in the commercials reviewed indicates that advertising has been obsessed with the story of "duping" straight men with "false" or "unreal" women. Most transgender people in advertising are implied to be dangerous and deceitful, always wanting to trap innocent straight men.

This stereotype of male-to-female transgender people as deceptive vamps can be best illustrated in the 2001 Samuel Adams beer commercial, which was rated as positive by the Commercial Closet Association. The ad begins with a close shot of a strikingly sexy woman with a handsome guy in a bedroom. She turns out to be a transsexual as she confesses to the handsome guy, but only after she hands him the beer. The guy shows grossed-out expression and says "I gotta go." But after he drinks his beer and exclaims

“Wow! That tastes great!" he turns back to the transsexual woman and asks “What was I saying?” forgetting everything he just heard. Then, the woman says with a sexy smile, “You are about to nibble on my lip." He smiles and then jumps back onto her in the bed. The tag line of “Mighty Tasty” then appears on the screen, implying that this powerful beer can make you have your way, even if it is to trap someone with amnesia. It is hard to argue if this commercial is designed to appeal to gay consumers. However, it is important to note that this ad was positively rated by the Commercial Closet Association staff because of “the twist on the ‘expected’ negative ending comes off as positive and accepting,” and “the ad is shot sympathetically from her perspective” (Wilke, commercialcloset.com). In a way, this problematic positive rating highlighted GLBT audiences’ aspiration for social tolerance, such that relatively non-judgmental or non-condemnatory portrayals would be perceived as “sympathetic” or “accepting.”

After reviewing the advertising strategies targeting gay consumers, we now turn to a more in-depth analysis of the GLBT representations to examine the social forces and marketing ideologies shaping these images.

## Sexualizing the Queers

### *Hyper-sexual Gym Bunnies*

In commercials that celebrate the gay dream consumer types, the white, male, urban professional guppies, are increasingly depicted. However, sexualized images, such as the hypersexual gym bunny stereotype (Tsai 2003) are also prevalent as homoerotica was another common strategy for targeting gay male consumers. Rooted in the social

stigmatization that gay men were sexually promiscuous, advertising messages targeting gay male consumers also tend to carry images of hypersexualized male bodies.

Although the ads that present sexualized male bodies may not be overtly gay, or contain direct references of same-sex intimacy, they carry tremendous currency in the gay community (Wilke, 2002), especially when they are argued to be targeting the gay male market such as the Calvin Klein underwear bulletin board ads in Time Square (Kates 2002a), which gives them inevitable homoerotic undercurrents. An extreme example of the sexualized male bodies that carried gay references was a 2001 series of Calvin Klein commercials, which pushed the limit further towards child pornography. In these commercials, inexperienced young male models are interviewed by an older camera man in a sexually provocative setting. The male interviewer asks questions like, “You have a nice look. How old are you?” “Why don’t you stand up? Are you strong?” “So you think you can rip that shirt off?” while the young men are shown ripping their clothes off in front of the camera. The sexual tension between the older-sounded interviewer and the young male models appeared to support the myth that gay men were sexually promiscuous and always seeking to molest young boys.

The sexual object in gay male culture—“the hypersexual gym bunnies…who are more preoccupied with pecs than principles” (Bergling 2001)—has been incorporated in advertising targeting gay male consumers. Similar to the sexualization of female bodies which may upset women’s self-esteems toward their body images, the sexualization of male bodies can be offensive to gay male audiences’ self-esteems toward their body images (Tsai 2003). These hypersexual muscleman images in advertising help to present

hyper-masculinity as the ideal standard of beauty for gay men and therefore, may encourage "sissyphobia" in the gay male community (Bergling 2001).

*Sexualized Lesbian Chic*

Beginning in the mid-1980s, representations of lesbians took on different forms of popular visibility, as explicit images of and overt references to lesbians appeared in numerous popular culture texts. After the publication of the August 1993 issue of *Vanity Fair,* which featured a cross-dressing k.d. lang being shaved by the supermodel Cindy Crawford, the phenomenon of "Lesbian Chic" had made its way into the mainstream culture. Lesbian-implied kisses were exchanged on the popular television programs like *Friends*, *Roseanne* and *Ally McBeal*. Out lesbian celebrities like, Melissa Etheridge and k.d. lang, were given prominence in gossip columns. Some commentators even argued that lesbianism was the new trend in the 1990s.

However, Ciasullo (2001) argues that most mainstream representations of lesbianism are heterosexualized or "straightened out" through the emphasis of hegemonic femininity demonstrated by the femme body. The trend of lesbian chic could become fashionable mainly because the presented lesbian is made into an object of desire for straight audiences through heterosexualization and feminization so that she looks "just like" conventionally attractive straight women. Additionally, Ciasullo argues that the lesbian is de-homosexualized because the representation of *desire* between two women is usually suppressed, sanitized of any homosexual residue.

However, the recent popularity of lesbianism in mainstream media that depict overt sexual tensions between two women signifies a dramatic change, exemplified by

the aforementioned Clothestime 1996 commercial. It is important to note that the flirtatious lesbian scenario with the exoticism implied by the sounds of a growling tiger in the background is shockingly similar to the media's exoticization of women of color.

The tantalizing female homoerotica in advertising might have little to do with lesbianism per se but instead, "mirror[s] those of women engaged in lesbian sex in mainstream heterosexual pornography" (Richart et al. 124). It is used as a common narrative device for heterosexual titillation, which is best illustrated by a 2004 Miller Lite commercial. The ad begins by showing two sexy women in business suits eating lunch at a beautiful outdoor cafe when they start arguing about whether the beer tastes great or is less filling. The women are then seen pulling each others' clothes off and wrestling in their bras and panties in a nearby fountain. The ad ends by completing the male fantasy with a lesbian reference, as one woman says seductively to the other, "Let's make out."

Some may argue that these fashionable, attractive, non-threatening lesbian images can offer a corrective to the relatively rigid stereotype that has dominated for decades: the angry, militant, mannish, lesbian feminist, butch lesbian. However, the femme or feminine images presented to mainstream audiences are more likely to be interpreted in ways that are not subversive at all. The result, in fact, could well be a re-inscription of mainstream norms and ideals. "Straight-looking" lesbians are exploited through sexualization and are accepted in such a way that they were distrusted to be "real" lesbians. At the same time, the over abundance of femme images may work to erase the butch from the media landscape. Inness (1997) thus argues,

> The butch is simultaneously the most visible and least visible member of society. She is visible because she stands out as an 'abnormal' woman who does not adhere to society's dictates about 'correct' femininity. She is invisible for exactly the same reason. Twisted by attempts to fit her into sanctioned conceptual categories, she becomes a distorted figure, the Other, the nonperson (p. 200).

The exclusion of images of butch-lesbians further reflects the non-confrontational appeal in TV commercials since butch-lesbians are often perceived to be more aggressive and threatening. Butch lesbians' reversal of traditional gender roles and their more masculine gender performance are associated to a more powerful gender role, posing a direct threat to the patriarchal domination.

In her research on the gender performance of muscular female athletes, Cahn observes that in order to evade public suspicion of reading them as (butch) lesbians, the athletes need to demonstrate their femininity and heterosexuality, which are viewed as one and the same (Cahn 1993). Since it is the unconventional gender performance that is so closely intertwined with lesbianism in public imagination, these playful, flirtatious lesbian chic images signify an implicit understanding that these women are not "real" lesbians. Inness (1997) thus argues that "in the landscape of women's magazines…the lesbian body frequently loses all association with real lesbians" (58). In this way, mainstream advertising has seemingly made room for positive representations, but the lesbians it chooses are de-contextualized from the lesbian community, de-coupled from the butch, and the gender-normative femmes, who can then be interpreted by the mainstream audiences as inauthentic (Ciasullo 2001) In mainstream advertising, lesbians are shown, but not seen, or not taken seriously.

Furthermore, lesbian bodies are materially, discursively, and racially coded in advertising for mainstream consumption. Scholars have observed that lesbians represented in the mainstream media are usually white, middle class and seem more interested in makeup and clothes than in feminism. Lesbians of color and of the lower classes are farther away from the mainstream definition of beauty, and thus are not consumable. Ciasullo (2001) argues that this cultural trend of lesbian chic is much akin to the ‘‘white’’ representations of women of color before the 1960s, because the feminized, heterosexualized lesbian in popular culture appears more palatable, more consumable to mainstream audiences.

While the life-style of lesbianism that reclaims fashion as “an assertion of personal freedom as well as political choice” (Clark 1989) is on the rise, the over-represented fashionable femme and the invisible butch in mainstream advertising are in sharp contrast to the fact that “it is the butch lesbian who has been synonymous with lesbianism in the public imagination” (Ciasullo 2001, p. 579). It is crucial to underscore the distinction which illuminates advertising’s commodification of lesbians by sensationalizing the consumable femmes and filtering out the more “threatening” butch. This contrast suggests that advertisers are uncomfortable incorporating “authentic” lesbianism on screen, but are willing to experiment with a type of ‘‘watered-down” lesbianism to ride on the wave of (femme) lesbian-chic. These casting selections, then, work to exclusively portray ‘‘luscious lesbianism’’ (Ciasullo 2001) on screen and emphasize the notion of a “good” lesbians who is gender-normative, attractive, white, and middle-class.

*The "Have-It-All" Bisexuals*

In stark contrast to other images of gay men and lesbians, bisexuality is almost a non-issue in advertising, particularly for bisexual men. The only commercial that carried references to male bisexuality was an Orbitz ad aired during gay-themed programs like "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" and "Boy Meets Boy." This ad features a couple composed of an Asian woman and a blonde man standing on the deck of their hotel, overlooking the pool. However, we later find out that the man is shown checking out a muscular man lying by the pool through a pair of binoculars while the woman compliments the great view. Although one may argue that the Orbitz commercial features bisexual male in a rather non-judgmental manner, it may again perpetuate the stigmatization that bisexuals are promiscuous and disloyal. In fact, the only advertising strategy to present bisexuality is one that shows the character's sexual interest in both genders, and often with a hint of deceitful nature in that they are always desiring the gender opposite to their partner.

The invisibility of male bisexuality in the cultural landscapes of GLBT representations is similar to the symbolic annihilation of butch lesbians. While female bisexuality and femme lesbians, which are often conflated in public imagination, are tantalizing to heterosexual male gaze, bisexual men and butch lesbians are not consumable or palatable to the heterosexual mainstream culture. The varied cultural construction of male and female sexuality also contributes to the dissimilar social perceptions towards male and female bisexuality.

Since bisexuals are defined by their versatile sexuality with interests in both genders, they are usually presented as omni-sexual or hyper-sexual, as illustrated in the aforementioned Amstel Light beer commercial. In the ad, the bisexual woman smiled to both of them as she feels truly flattered by both of her suitors. This ad reflects the social misconceptions of bisexual people as hedonistic, hypersexual, and having a doubled chance for dates. Combining our society's extreme heterosexism, homophobia, as well as biphobia in the gay community, it might be more accurate to say that bisexuals get the worst of both sides.

*Sensationalizing Trans Women*

Although the number of people transitioning from male-to-female or from female-to-male is rather equal these days, the only type of transgender/transsexual people presented in the commercials reviewed was male-to-female transgender individuals. Additionally, trans women were frequently shown in an extremely sexy and feminine manner in order to serve up the surprising twist: “She is a He!” as shown in a 1997 Holiday Inn commercial. In this ad, a stunning woman arrives at her high school reunion and quickly draws everybody’s attention. The male voice-over then announces “New nose $6,000, new chest $8,000,” while we see close camera shots of her body parts in an extremely fetishistic manner. Then, the woman is stopped by an obnoxious guy who thinks he would recognize her. He realizes something, and in shock, says, "Bob? Bob Johnson?" The voice-over then concludes, "It's amazing the changes you can make for a few thousand dollars. Imagine what happens when we spend a billion on our new Holiday Inn.”

A transgender activist once commented that “media tend to ignore trans men because they are unable to sensationalize them the way they do with trans women, without questioning the concept of masculinity itself” (Serano 2004). Jamison Green, a trans man and transgender activist, also wrote about his invisibility as a transsexual person because reporters typically look for “the man in a dress.” Serano (2004) further argues that “popular media tends to assume that all transsexuals are male-to-female, and that all trans women want to achieve stereotypical feminine appearance and gender role” (p.41). This presumption is built upon unspoken misogyny since most people cannot understand why someone would give up male privilege to become a disempowered female in the gender hierarchy. Most people assume that trans women choose to transition for the one type of power that women are perceived to have in the patriarchal society—to embody femininity and to attract men. Although the gender-crossing transgender individuals pose the biggest challenges to our taken-for-granted gender concepts, trans women in advertising actually perpetuate traditional gender roles through their hyper-femininity. Because transgender/transsexual people pose serious threat to the categories that enable male and heterosexual privilege, in order to feature the experiences of trans people in the advertising, they are represented in a way that reaffirms, rather than challenges, gender stereotypes (Serano 2004).

Similar to the invisibility of butch lesbians, female-to-male transgender men were completely absent in advertising. Tuchman’s argues that (1978) “symbolic annihilation” is the way in which cultural production and media representations ignore, exclude, marginalize, or trivialize social minorities and their experiences. According to Tuchman,

symbolic annihilation is the erasure of a specific minority representation in mass media so that the dominant culture can promote stereotypes and further deny specific identities. The lack of representation in advertising has made butch lesbian, bisexual men, and transgender person victims of symbolic annihilation. Tuchman further classifies the concept of symbolic annihilation into three aspects: omission, trivialization, and condemnation. In addition to advertising's omission of trans men, the heavy sexualization of trans women constitutes the trivialization form of symbolic annihilation through which trans women are sensationalized for shocking effect.

In order to dramatize the ability of trans women to "pass" as conventionally attractive straight women, media often dwell on the feminization process, such as showing trans women in the act of putting on their make-ups and costumes, or detailing the costs of the plastic surgery, such as the aforementioned Holiday Inn commercial. By defining trans women through their embodiment of physical femininity, media have encouraged the audience to fetishize trans women, and women in general. However, by elaborating on the feminization process and tactics, media also thereby make it clear that the trans women's femaleness was artificial. Even though the hyper-feminine trans women can successfully "pass", it is often emphasized in advertising that they are "fake" women when their secret identities are revealed in a dramatic moment of "truth," such as the shocking moment in the Holiday Inn commercial. At the moment of exposure, the trans woman's femaleness is reduced to mere illusion, and her secret (her maleness) becomes her real identity.

Because trans women sometimes can pass as "real" women, they were are shown in advertising to serve the unexpected plot twists, or play the role of sexual predators who fool innocent straight guys into sex. By emphasizing "she is a man after all," trans women in advertising are implied to be dangerous and deceitful, always wanting to trap innocent straight men, such as the trans woman in the aforementioned Samuel Adams's commercial who tricks straight men into sex with the aid of the product, beer.

**Commodifying the Queers**

The heavy sexualization of GLBT people in advertising works to convert the threatening gender and sexual outlaws into a fetish. As suggested by Laura Mulvey (1975), fetishistic fascination of the threatening Other can turn the represented figure into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous, as it becomes consumable and yet still exotic. Gay sensibility and gay subculture are thus incorporated into mainstream culture largely through fetishization and commodification. Some marketing commentaries explicitly argue that the new "gay style" works to boost straight spending (anonymous 2004) rather than present gay subculture.

Facing the accelerating pace of gay assimilation into the mainstream and the increasing commercialization of gay sensibility, critics fear for the survival of a more radical and an authentically gay subculture. Gay writer Daniel Harris (1999) and journalist Daniel Mendelsohn (1996) are concerned that increasing assimilation into the mainstream culture robs gay subcultures of their distinctiveness. In his book, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, Harris laments the demise of "aristocratic ideals of aestheticism" that gay sensibility has fostered. Mendelsohn (1996) also argues that "gay

sensibility is now indistinguishable from the mainstream or has been pasteurized into total consumer-culture irrelevance (p. 30)."

In the broader social context, the 1990s have been described as the era for "queer frenzy" in various popular culture, media and marketing discourses (Ciasullo 2001; Sender 2004) while the reasons for this sudden obsession is left untheorized. According to Michael Bronski, "when gay sensibility is used as a sales pitch, the strategy is that gay images imply distinction and non-conformity, granting straight consumers a longed-for place outside the humdrum mainstream." Judith Williamson (1978) also notes that about dominant culture, as the customs and habits of the oppressed seem so much more fascinating. In particular, bell hooks argues convincingly that the commodification of otherness has been successful because the otherness serves as a new spice that is more exciting, and more exotic.

Similar to bell hooks' critique regarding the white mainstream's commodification of black culture that works to perpetuate the status quo, the current commodification of queer culture that seems to glamorize the queer "lifestyle," in no way challenges the heterosexual and patriarchal domination.. Paradoxically, the commodification of queer culture works to assimilate the queer community into the mainstream. By emphasizing gay men as educated, wealthy, and upper-middle class, emphasizing lesbians as beautiful and lovers of shopping, emphasizing bisexuals as always having a good time, and emphasizing transgender women as obsessed with feminine fetishes, advertising works to commodify the gender and sexual "other" for mainstream consumption, and at the same time, makes queers look just like heterosexuals.

By targeting only a selective group from the gay community, advertising prizes this group and holds them as representative—an ideal by which the lesbian or gay subject is taught to measure him or herself. As the gay critic Bill Short (1992) wrote, "Many of us who wish to maintain a gay identity, actually buy that identity…We are forced to prove we exist by projecting a gay image or lifestyle" (p.20). When reaching out to gay consumers through gay advertising, advertisers attempt to define the identity of the gay community, defining it to suit its own needs. As early as 1984, Michael Bronski was criticizing this development, claiming that a gay identity and a marketed "gay lifestyle" are not necessarily the same thing, while the first is becoming more obviously constructed by the latter.

Gay marketing and gay advertising thus function to cultivate a gay consumer culture. Mary Ann Doane (1982) discusses how traditionally the female is constructed in economic terms as both consumers of commodities and as a commodity herself, that "all consumerism involves the ideal of self-image." Marketing and advertising thus not only promotes the product but describes and promotes a specific type of identity, a "commodity self" (Ewen 1976). For example, the ideal of a shaved, muscular, young man has become a beauty standard within gay male culture, a standard that gay men are conditioned to aspire to as well as are taught that it can be achieved through consumption (Griffin 1998).

**Gay Advertising as an Assimilationist Discourse**

When commenting on the capitalist free market as the site of struggle and negotiation for various consumer groups, Gledhill (1988) argues,

> capitalism cannot ignore the potential market represented by groups emerging into new public self-identity and its processes invariably turn alternative life-styles and identities into commodities, through which they are subtly modified and *thereby recuperated for the status quo*" (p. 71, emphasis mine).

Advertising has been widely recognized as a significant way of acculturation for outside groups (Buford 22). In Chasin's (2000) review of advertising history, the assimilationist appeal is observed beginning with attempts to assimilate new immigrants into American mass consumption in the early twentieth century. Moreover, the gay niche market is frequently depicted as a social group with strong assimilationist aspirations for civil rights. Gay critic Harris (1997) argues that, in contrast to ethnic minorities, gay culture has been assimilated into the mainstream with a particularly accelerating pace.

Although most of the out-of-closet television commercials have been positively rated by the Commercial Closet Association for avoiding gay stereotypes, they also tend to emphasize the white, middle-class, gender-normative images of lesbians and gay men. The exclusion of images of butch-lesbians and trans-men suggests the non-confrontational appeal in TV commercials, since butch-lesbians and trans-men are perceived to be more aggressive and dangerous for their reversal of the traditional gender roles and taking on the implied more powerful position that is threatening to patriarchy. The current practice of gay advertising and its skewed representations of white, upper-middle class, and/or "straight-looking" gay men are at the expense of those who are more

distant from the mainstream standard, such as queer people of color, butch lesbians and transgender people in general. Field (1996) further indicates that the underlying assumption of the celebratory discourse on the gay market is that liberation for gay people can be achieved through consumption:

> The gay business class…uses an open rhetoric of liberation and self-expression through commercial strength and consumer power. It offers a version of gay freedom which is based on the visibility and power of gay markets….The positive, thrusting confidence of gay marketers appears to make a refreshing change from the familiar reiteration of suffering, persecution and passive victimhood (Field 1996, p.348).

Sender also discusses that gay consumers' excitement over gay marketing and gay advertising reflects a belief that seeing gays and lesbian people in all walks of life—in marketing, media images, political life, and as celebrities—demonstrates that "we are everywhere and thus normalize gayness for a hitherto fearful and ignorant heterosexual population" (Sender 2004, p.7). However, the symbolic annihilation of butch lesbians, bisexual men, and trans men, and the trivialization of bisexual women and trans women in mainstream media does not permit a "we are everywhere" optimism beyond images of gender-normative gays and lesbians.

The assimilationist appeal that emphasizes social tolerance or acceptance of gays can be illustrated in various beer commercials that are positively rated on commercialcloset.com for the harmonious relationships between the GLBT and the straight characters. GLBT people are shown accepted by the heterosexual characters with the aid of the products, such as beer. These ads suggest that consumption can lead to

social tolerance or acceptance. These ads depict a fantasy world in which gay people are accepted by the mainstream.

The assimilationist advertising strategy may be appreciated by gay consumers who have long suffered from discrimination and stigmatization, as several marketing research reports have indicated that gay consumers are fed up with gay stereotypes, as lesbians and gay men are surprisingly settled on wanting to be portrayed as "no different from anybody else." However, scholars also warned that assimilationist gay advertising may empower gay consumers while at the same time, re-appropriate the status quo. Thus, it also generates concerns about its political consequences as well as its impacts on unique gay aesthetics, sensitivity, and gay subculture.

> So many ads are so unsophisticated in gay magazines, advertisers so nervous, and the gay community's visual preferences in openly gay media so unclear that gay magazines are looking, well, so straight. (Kahn, "The Glass Closet" 1994, p. 22)

For radical queer groups, the assimilationist representations of gay people in advertising may obscure the politically and sexually subversive aspects of queer life by offering acceptable images and showing gays as "just like everybody (straight) else." Since the birth of the modern gay movement in 1969, there has been a radical queer/gay assimilationist split. Different from mainstream gay rights discourses, radical queer organizations, such as the Queer Nation founded in 1990, reappropriated "queer" as a political invention and intervention to confront "gay assimilationists and straight oppressors" while include "people who have been marginalized by anyone in power" (Penn 1995, p. 30). Constructed as a politics of confrontation and dissent, radical queer

politics is not concerned with identity politics, but aims to destabilize the boundaries that divide the dominant and the oppressed, the normal and the deviant, and to challenge heteronormativity as long with various types of oppressive hegemony. Instead of assimilation, radical queer activists defiantly claim for the right to be different.

Yet, Chasin (2000) points out that the recently developed gay consumerism is closely aligned with an assimilationist ideology that counters a more progressive queer activism. Stuart Ewen (1976) also speaks of modern consumerist capitalism endowing the mass audience with an "industrial democracy," in which the individual is made to believe that freedom and equality are defined as the ability to consume and to possess, supplementing or reducing the desire for actual social reform.

Critics' debate on the assimilationist appeal in gay advertising is reflective of the ongoing radical queer politics versus assimilationist gay rights split. As scholars suggested, different approaches to gay liberation have marked the entire history of the gay liberation movement. On one hand, radical queer groups like the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) refuse to join the mainstream and aim to fight the cultural homophobia alongside racism, sexism, and militarism for more comprehensive and racial social changes. On the other hand, this broad political vision is not shared by every GLBT individual, as The Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) is formed "exclusively devoted to the liberation of homosexuals and avoids involvement in any program of action not obviously relevant to homosexuals." The split between radical queer politics and the assimilationist gay rights politics has continued to shape gay people's self-identities, their

degrees of identification with the community, their definitions of a queer community, their political beliefs as well as their consumption behaviors.

Scholars have also indicated that the radical queer/gay assimilationist split is a class division within the gay movement. Duberman (1986) and Shepard (2001) both argue that the split "is as much about capitalism as it is about anything else" (Shepard 2001 p. 47). Gay consumers' reading of gay advertising, their brand relationships, and their consumption culture thus need to be contextualized in the broader socio-cultural framework of class bias, racism, sexism, as well as the queer politics/gay assmilationist conflicts.

# CHAPTER V

## QUEER SPECTATORSHIP AND GAY WINDOW ADVERTISING

Alexander Doty (1993) provides one of the most extensive efforts to study mainstream media texts through a queer lens. In his book *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, he argues that gay subtext has been prevalent in mainstream media texts, but is hidden behind the concept of connotation that allows "straight culture to use queerness for pleasure and profit in mass culture without admitting to it" (xi). Although most mass media texts are not directly or explicitly about queers, Doty indicates that the queerness of most mass culture involves a fluid reception position, and includes historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gay men, lesbian, and bisexuals.

Marketers' use of gay window advertising to court the gay market is consistent with the media history of gay representations that are shown only through the opaque closet of connotation. This advertising strategy tries to appeal to lesbian and gay consumers, without alerting homophobic audiences, by using androgynous images, in-group language, ambiguous scenarios, and symbols of gay subculture. Yet, Doty explains that the queerness of most mass cultural texts is not an essential, waiting-to-be-discovered property, but the result of historically specific cultural uses of texts by queer audiences. The queerness of gay window advertising also resides in audiences' negotiated readings.

Furthermore, because of the polysemic nature of cultural texts, and of gay window advertising specifically, as well as audiences' multi-facet identity dimensions

including gender, race, class, religion, and political affiliation, a prediction of decoded meaning based upon sexual identity alone is unreliable, limiting, and essentializing. Questions regarding lesbian, gay men, bisexual and transgender audiences' reading of gay window advertising texts are concerned less with whether they "get it or not," but rather with *what* are the cultural cues, social contexts, and subjective interpretation positions that made some readings possible by *whom*, and in relation to which socio-cultural and political ideologies. These questions involve consideration of audiences' multiple identity factors, belief systems, experiences with the GLBT community, attitude towards with the gay rights movements, and their interpretive strategies. The implications of these negotiated readings concerning how particular interpretations could offer pleasure, empowerment, or resistance for some audiences, but were perceived as exploitive or problematic by some others, are crucial for illuminating the social and thus political nature of consumption and consumer culture. Participants' interpretative narratives of the ambiguous gay window texts illustrate that actualized ad meanings are constituted by various highly contested marketing, political, and media ideologies. Participants' conceptualization of the gay niche market, consumer culture, and their definition of "gayness" also illuminates the social constructionist nature of sexual identities.

**Queering the Mainstream Media**

We started the interview conversation by discussing participants' media usage and experience with GLBT representations. Many of my participants commented on the lack of explicit gay images on mass media when they were growing up in the 60s or 70s, except for the sporadic news reports on stigmatized gay stereotypes such as gay male sexual predators. Without seeing any GLBT images in mass media and knowing any role models, many GLBT people have gone through a very lonely coming-out process. Dana is a self-identified butch lesbian who grew up in a small town in Mississippi close to the Bible belt. Struggling with her sexuality without knowing any other gay people was an extremely isolating experience:

> I felt I was the only one going through it. It felt like, I was the only one in my high school, or in the whole town, that had all those strange feelings and emotions. I isolated myself and went through a lot of depression, some self-mutilation. My friends tried to help me. But I had a hard time accepting it. If I had seen Ellen coming out on TV when I was 13, everything would be so different." (Dana, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

However, many participants also pointed out their long experience of recognizing and enjoying gay subtexts from mass media. For the participants who grew up in the era and in areas with limited, if not zero, exposure to gay representations, gay subtexts in the presumably heterosexual mainstream media constituted one of the only sources of identification and affirmation for their sexual identities. One of the gay subtexts identified by many participants was the 1991 film *Fried Green Tomatoes*. The film is based on Fannie Flagg's original novel that focuses on the twenty-year friendship between two young women in the early twentieth century American South. The film,

which is often enjoyed as a story of two "best friends" by straight audiences, has been highly regarded in the gay and lesbian communities as a lesbian subtext based on its strong female bonding and the absence of a heterosexual subplot. For Dana, seeing *Fried Green Tomatoes* on the big screen was a moment of self-realization and validation:

> I think *Fried Green Tomatoes* was the most mainstream movie at that time. I remember falling in love with it. I remember thinking, "wow, that encapsulates me right there." At that time, I didn't know who I was, and the movie was very subtle…but that just felt so right. It was really a turning point for me. (Dana, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

Many of my lesbian participants also identified *Fried Green Tomatoes* as their first lesbian movie. The fact that the lesbian relationship between the two main characters was made far more clear in the original novel was irrelevant to participants' lesbian reading of the film, since many of them were not aware of the original novel or had never read it. Although many participants acknowledged the fact that the movie was not positioned as a lesbian movie and was not considered as a lesbian story in the mainstream society, the female characters in the film were the first few images that they could identify with as lesbian viewers.

Scholars have suggested that popular culture has always been a source of pleasure for lesbian and gay male audiences (Doty 1993, 2000; McKenna 2002). Another frequently mentioned media text believed to contain a lesbian undertone is the popular TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess*. *XWP* is an adventure series set in an ancient world of myths, gods and heroes of ancient Greece, dragons, giants, and magic. Xena (Lucy Lawless) is the heroine with a voluptuous figure clad in sexy leather armor.

Foregrounding the story is the deep, loving relationship between Xena and her companion, Gabrielle (Renee O'Connor). Whether this relationship is friendship or romantic love is left ambiguous in the show. Because of its strong female characters and emphasis on female bonding, *XWP* has enjoyed a huge following among lesbians and bisexual women. With the limited lesbian representations on mainstream media, identifying with Xena and Gabrielle was a common experience among many female participants, as Kit (African American, lesbian, 19) says, "I started noticing lesbian things in shows a lot earlier, when I was 12, when I realized I like girls. So I started watching things like *Xena*." Janice, a self-identified lesbian English teacher, also commented on the popularity of Xena in the lesbian community:

> Xena is a totally lesbian show. I don't regularly watch it but I think everybody saw this being that because they wanted to. The lesbian community got into it because it has two strong female characters. You know it's like Judy Garland to the gay [male] community; no real connection but they take it anyway. So they read into it a lot more than maybe what's intended to be there. (Janice, Caucasian, lesbian, 35)

Carmen further argued that the lesbian subtext was made available and occasionally highlighted by the show producers to attract lesbian audiences:

> Her [Xena's] relationship with Gabrielle was very intimate and at the end of series, it became *almost overtly lesbian* [emphasized by the participant]. Like in one episode, someone asked Gabriel, "Are you and Xena together?" and she would not answer. I think they [the show producers] just realized "wow, we have this audience. Let's take advantage of it." So they would not make it overtly lesbian but would keep the little hints to keep us watching. (Caucasian, lesbian, 18)

Some participants in their early twenties also offered their queer readings of several well-known superhero stories, including Superman, X-Men, Batman and Robin, as they could identify with the superheroes' experience of having a secret identity and living a double life. In particular, the movie series of *X-Men* was cited by many participants for its gay allegories. Various participants strongly identified with the underlying theme of "accepting people as they are and not judging them" (Andy, Asian American, gay, 20). Even though none of the individual *X-Men* characters are depicted as "gay" characters in the movies, the mutants were believed to function as a metaphor for gays. Some explained that, like most gay people, mutants develop and discover their "special powers" at puberty. They are stigmatized, despised, and feared by the society for being "born different" and many are forced to live a "closeted life." The mutants' discovery of their special powers that frighten the society was seen as an analogy to gay people's discovery of their homosexuality; the fear of mutants in *X-Men* was equated with societal homophobia. Additionally, they pointed out that mutants face socially sanctioned bigotry from governments with anti-mutant legislation, just as gay people are discriminated against through anti-gay marriage and adoption laws. In this way, the *X-Men* movies were enjoyed as a fantasy of gay political activism.

Many other examples of mainstream media texts that were noted by participants for their queerness fell into the genre of fantasy films, including the *Lord of the Rings* movies, and even some Disney animations. Although Disney movies were often considered to be consciously promoting heterosexual romance, traditional family values, and heteronormative ideologies, various Disney characters were considered to be gay by

several young participants due to the perceived non-conventional gender performance. Two queer-identified female undergraduate students, Kit (African American, lesbian, 19) and Carmen (Caucasian, lesbian, 18), had the following exchange:

> Kit: Scar was overtly gay and he was a villain. From his mannerism, and you can tell. I was like, something was not right about Scar [laughter].
>
> Carmen: Ya, I noticed Scar was gay…you would even see, a lot of time, in Disney movies this sort of effeminate male villains, like Jafar too [from *Aladdin*]. He was very effeminate.
>
> Kit: Or butch lesbian villains like Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* [laughter].
>
> Carmen: Ya, I was like, she is just so gay [laughter]. And Timon and Pumbaa [from *Lion King*]. My friends and I think they were the first Disney gay couple! Sometimes you can read things that you are not supposed to be reading that way. Maybe they didn't write it that way, but you can always look at things and see what you want.

Some participants articulated the fluid identification position and queer pleasure even with the overtly heterosexual texts. Helena, who is an out lesbian police officer, talked about her reading pleasure of heterosexual romance novels.

> I love romance books, even though they are for straight. I simply replaced the boy with a girl, with me, in fact [laughter]. I like the description of emotion, how they [romance novel characters] felt about each other. It's universal. (Helena, Caucasian, lesbian, 44)

It is important to note that although participants acknowledged that their queer readings might not have been the preferred meaning intended by the text producers, they demonstrated confidence and assuredness in their queer readings without minimizing them as "wishful or willful misreadings." Doty (1993) also challenges the notion that queer interpretations of dominant media texts be regarded as "alternative," rather than

enjoying the same status as interpretations based on heterosexual assumptions. Doty (2000) reminds us to reconsider the politics of all reading—what allows heterosexual audiences to read heterosexuality into films that have no explicit heterosexual romance, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, yet reject the idea that Timon and Pumbaa in *Lion King* could be lovers.

More importantly, participants' queer reading and sensibility of mainstream media texts were legitimized through their participation in the GLBT communities and in turn enhanced in-group solidarity. Many participants read about other GLBT audiences' queer readings of mainstream media texts and discussed the legitimacy of these readings on chat rooms, personal blogs, and social gatherings. One of the regular agendas for the weekly social gatherings of SheSays, a student organization of lesbian, bisexual, and questioning women, was "gay representations in mass media." During the meeting, attendees discussed their favorite gay celebrities and their favorite television shows and movies, including shows that contained gay subtexts or suspicious characters.

Beyond the level of personal viewing pleasure, queer readings have cultivated participants' identification with the queer community, through a collectively constructed gay sensibility and shared passion and rituals. For example, gay men's sensibility towards classic Hollywood cinema have turned them into classic queer films, and their relationship with some mainstream female stars, including Judy Garland, Dianna Ross, and Madonna, have made them into gay icons well-known within and beyond the GLBT communities. Queer readings and the appropriated cultural artifacts thus serve as a common bond within the queer community. Jack, who is a film critic and a graduate

student in film studies, talked about his passion for classic Hollywood cinema that was shared by many gay men:

> I was a big fan of Joan Crawford. I saw all of her movies when I was little. Later on, I realized it's a very gay thing to do. Her films are well loved by gay men….There is this community who reads mainstream culture in a different way. (Jack, Caucasian, gay, 35)

Jack's experience of gay reading being part of a collective communal practice may suggest an interpretive community constructed around GLBT people's "poaching" of mainstream media texts. Interpretive strategies thus may reflect and construct a shared social identity among audiences. In this perspective, interpretive communities are social groups that share similar intellectual, social, and cultural resources and patterns of making meanings. Scott (1994) further defines interpretive strategies as "the manner of reading, the purpose of reading, the attitude toward the text, and the knowledge the reader may have (or lack) that is brought to the reading experience" (p. 474). Due to the social constructionist nature of the interpretive communities, the community boundaries are always fuzzy and unstable. Yet, the fundamental premises of the construct are that members of various audience groups, such as the loosely defined yet highly heterogeneous queer communities, have significant connections to their social positions and use a broadly similar repertoire of interpretive strategies, resulting in similar interpretations of texts.

The concept of interpretive communities, especially in the field of fandom studies, has been explored by media scholars. For example, Jenkins' (1991) work investigating the interpretive activities of a group of female fans of the animated film, *Beauty and the*

*Beast*, shows how the female fans drew on the program's balance of romance and action-adventure to work through contradictions and uncertainties about the place of femininity in an era where women are assuming more and more professional responsibility. Yet, queer readings have not been thoroughly studied with the construct of interpretive communities. I argue that queer interpretive communities are constructed around the shared history of queer invisibility, or the limited visibility of queer subtexts, the cultivation of gaydar as a survival mechanism for mutual identification in a hostile world, and socio-cultural resources such as gossip, rumors, symbols, and insider-languages.

In the field of consumer research, Kates (2002) advocates the use of interpretive community construct to advance brand or subcultural ethnographies. Duncan and Moriarty (1998) argue that marketing activities and marketing communications are social and associational in nature. In the dialogic relationship between marketers and consumers, consumers often invoke various flexible sociocultural codes to construct meaning about the text and the brand or sponsor (Hall 1980, 1997; Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999). The queer appropriation of marketing communication texts and GLBT consumers' interpretive strategies are now explored through the analysis of my GLBT participants' interpretations of the malleable gay window commercials.

**Decoding Gay Window Advertising**

All of the interview participants were aware of this trend of gay advertising and gay marketing prior to the study. Most of them had regular access to gay publications and were familiar with gay-themed advertisements, including both implicit and non-implicit ones, but mostly print ads. Additionally, most of them were aware of mainstream advertisers' marketing promotions and activities targeting the gay communities, such as sponsorships in Pride events and gay and lesbian film festivals. For television commercials, many of them had not seen gay-themed commercials on mainstream television prior to the study, except those who came from metropolitan areas where there are well-known gay ghettos, such as New York City. Yet, many of them have noticed certain gay-suggestive ones on television, including certain gay window ads shown in the interview. It should be noted that that being interviewed in a context of a gay advertising study might have a framing effect on participants' interpretations of gay window ads that they were more likely to generate gay readings, as compared to the daily viewing television commercials in their living room.

While it did appear that many of my GLBT participants generated gay readings for most gay window ads within the interview study context, some did not. Additionally, none of the selected gay window ads were able to induce gay readings from all participants. For example, most of my male participants did not make lesbian readings out of most lesbian window commercials. In fact, the polysemy of gay window commercials was commented on by almost every participant and was predominantly believed to be a purposeful marketing deploy.

**Politics of Polysemy: Targeting Everybody At the Same Time!**

Audiences construct individual meanings within the confines of an ideological structure (Radway 1984) that allows for a limited range of readings relevant to the cultural identifications and social positioning of consumers. Rather than having unlimited possibilities of interpretations of gay window texts, much of the participants' interpretive narratives focused on the structured polysemy of gay or non-gay readings. Morley (1993) proposes the idea of "structured polysemy" which allows for a range of readings to be already coded within texts that are differentially responded to by audiences, depending upon the relevance of a given reading to their cultural identifications. It is precisely this connection—between relevance and structured polysemy—that gay window advertising employs to communicate with audiences of varied sexual and gender identifications.

Additionally, participants' interpretive narratives were concerned less with *whether* polysemy is possible or available in the gay window advertising texts, but with *why* the polysemy is employed by marketers. The underlying assumption behind these questions was the acknowledgement that gay window ads could be distinguished from conventional commercials that were perceived to be consciously and explicitly promoting heterosexual normality. Gay window ads were distinct for the perceived uncertainty resulting from the ambiguous same-sex groupings and the absence of heterosexual contextualization.

It is not only the ambiguity of gay window ads that caught participants' attention; the belief of "intentional polysemy" was also made clear in the discussions of various gay window ads. For example, a 2002 Zyrtec allergy medicine commercial that features two

average-looking women, both with shoulder-length hair, was believed to be made intentionally open for polysemic interpretations. In the ad, the characters were shown sitting very closely to each other when they addressed to the camera about their shared allergies: “When it comes to allergies, we're both pollen, cat, dust. But her allergy medicine was only approved for the pollen.” “So my doctor switched mine to hers.” “She's always copying,” the other says with a smile. Later in the ad, they were shown building a birdhouse together, as their cat looking on. Most of my lesbian and bisexual female participants read the two female characters in the ad clearly as a lesbian couple. They also repeatedly argued that the ad is designed to appeal to both the straight consumers as well as the lesbian community, as Dana argues:

> The portrayal of these women…not super butch or super feminine. But I would read them as lesbian couple because they are really intimate, and they have a cat in their house [laughter]! But ya, they can be just good friends or sisters. I think it’s targeting a much broader audience. It got a little of everybody in mind. I think it is being inclusive. (Dana, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

By decoding the gay window ads as gay, and framing their gay reading as one of the preferred meanings designed by marketers, participants not only felt included, but also acknowledged as a legitimate consumer group. Marina, who grew up in a religious conservative family in the 70s, commented on the relatively inviting gay window ads with a grateful tone.

> It’s welcoming. My feeling is that they are playing with this thing, and I get this insider’s joke. Thank you!....It’s welcoming me, allowing me to enjoy that humor. (Marina, African American, lesbian, 44)

Similarly, Bette expressed her excitement over decoding the Zyrtec commercial:

> It's really cool that not everybody would necessarily tune in to the little cues. You can look at it different ways…I believe it's done intentionally. I feel being recognized and acknowledged. (Bette, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

It is important to note that participants' awareness about the multiple possibilities of interpretations of the gay window ads also led some of them to see the strategy as an all-inclusive one. They argued that there was more than one preferred or correct readings, but the ad was "open for interpretation." Many felt their gay reading was one of the preferred meanings intended by the advertisers, as valid as straight audiences' reading of friendship or sisterhood and many found the strategy convincing. For example, Daniel explained the gay window strategy within the framework of marketing ideologies:

> I guess most marketing, unless it's completely targeted, want to reach as broad audience as they can, because it is a much bigger market. I can see why they would make it ambiguous, so that they would attract the gay market but also appealing to the straight at the same time. (Daniel, Mexican American, gay, 37)

The polysemy of media texts has also been discussed among media scholars. Some argue that for media producers, polysemy is an undesirable characteristic of texts, which must be minimized in order to produce a unitary "preferred" reading (Hall 1980). It is also often reported in marketing and advertising trade publications that the consumer market is sliced into evermore precise consumer segments based on demographic, psychographic, and lifestyle characteristics. Similarly, commercial media have proliferated and been fragmented, featuring specialized programming designed to attract a defined audience niche. Targeted advertising and niche marketing thus have been widely adopted by marketers for more effective communication to or "impact" on the

target consumers. The mass or dual appeal of gay window advertising thus presents an interesting contrast to the marketing trend.

In contrast, Fiske (1987) argues that polysemy is an inevitable and productive quality of texts which producers should encourage in order to appeal to the broadest range of audiences. He further explains that various audience groups would use popular culture for their own subcultural interests as a result of "semiotic democracy." This perspective was also endorsed by participants who considered the all-inclusiveness of gay window advertising as "better marketing." Polysemy was emphasized as a favorable and profitable quality so that the ad "can target everyone at the same time" (Andy, Asian American, gay, 20). From this perspective, gay window advertising was considered by participants as "designed with gay and lesbian consumers in mind," (Daniel, Mexican American, gay, 37) but not specifically for the gay market. Consequently, many participants emphasized the significance of being part of a broader market.

In a related vein, when commenting on their opinions and attitudes towards the gay window strategy, some participants acclaimed the perceived inclusiveness as being non-discriminatory. Some further advocated the strategy for "not essentializing difference" (Will, Caucasian, bisexual, 29). Furthermore, Billy commented on the malleability of gay window strategy that allowed him to picture "we are queer, we are everywhere:"

> I felt like I have been included in a broader market… these ambiguous stories and images are suggesting that "everyone can be gay!" But at the same time, it does not assume that we are…so different from anybody else. Everybody is mixed together and people can read whatever they want. (Billy, Jewish, gay, 44)

However, the participants who appreciated the perceived inclusiveness of gay window advertising failed to question the dilemma that they were acknowledged by marketers only indirectly and implicitly. Gay consumers existed but remained closeted in marketer's advertising strategy since they were not openly recognized in their advertising messages, and more importantly, unseen to other (heterosexual) consumers. Although they reckoned their gay readings to be a valid interpretation intended by the marketers, they were also aware that heterosexual audiences' were unlikely to read those gay window images and plots as gay. In this perspective, the argument of inclusivesss and the gratitude for marketers' covert recognition of the gay niche signifies participants' aspiration for social acceptance, and to be included in the mainstream society.

**Dominant Readings, Privileged Readings, and Insider Knowledge**

In contrast to the participants who considered gay window advertising as containing both gay and non-gay, but equally rightful meanings, some were more assertive about gay window ads as being specifically gay oriented since the encoded gay references and cultural cues were believed to signify marketers' thoughtful and meticulous efforts to court gay and lesbian consumers.

A 2000 Subaru commercial that features several female athletes as endorsers, including golfers Juli Inkster, Meg Mallon and Olympic skier Diann Roffe-Steinrotter, and the famous out lesbian tennis player, Martina Navratilova, is an example of lesbian window advertising. In the ad, the female athletes each asked "What do I know…" about vehicle performance, control, and grip. Martina Navratilova got the last shot asking

"What do we know? We are just girls" with a suggestive smile. Most participants believed this ad was designed to have included the gay and lesbian market in its marketing strategy because of its use of a famous lesbian celebrity. Yet, some proclaimed that this ad is gay-targeted, rather than gay-inclusive, since, in addition to Martina Navratilova, the commercial featured other lesbian athletes whose sexual identities were not widely known to the heterosexual society:

> It's really interesting that not everybody would necessarily tune into the fact that most, if not all the people in that ad are *family* [emphasized by the participant], or are gay. You can read it as an ad of strong female athletes and role models, but hey, I know these people are in fact gay! It's just funny to see the little insider stuff that not everybody is aware of. Because it's too well-done to be an accident, I feel being acknowledged….you know at least two of these people are gay….They can use other athletes but they chose the lesbian athletes, and it's Martina…So you know they are catering to a specific group [the gay community]. (Bette, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

In her interpretive narratives, Bette used the coded word "family" that was widely used in the community to refer to other GLBT-identified people. The social use of the term "family" connotes an insider understanding that someone is gay or bisexual but may not be out in the public, such as "Oh, he is family for sure." Although many participants were unable to identify if the other two female athletes in the commercial were lesbians, the fact that the ad featured a "family member," Juli Inkster, whose lesbian identity is less well-known to the straight society, played a significant role in participants' "insider" reading. Consequently, the ad plot has induced many female participants to "wonder if the other women were also gay." (Shirley, African American, lesbian, 43).

Additionally, Bette pointed out the prevalent product placement of Subaru in Showtime's *The L-Word*, a lesbian-themed TV series of which Bette considered herself a big fan. Another loyal fan of *The L-Word* show, Audra, also made an immediate association between Subaru and the lesbian community:

> It's the brand of *L-Word*. It's so blatantly trying to say, "hey, we want to represent and advertise towards lesbians and you should buy our cars." (Audra, Mexican American, lesbian, 22)

It is important to note that Subaru of America is one of the first marketers targeting lesbian consumers and has successfully built a long term relationship with the GLBT communities through its continuous sponsorship of GLBT events. The knowledge of Subaru's history with the GLBT communities and its popularity among lesbian consumers was a key factor that influenced participants' reading of the Subaru ad. Fiona, a medical school student, observed that Subaru enjoyed unique brand equity in the lesbian community:

> I know so many lesbians who drive Subaru wagons. It is funny but I sometimes would check out the [Subaru] owner to see if that is a lesbian [laughter]! Sometimes you can even find stickers that say "girls kick ass," or "vegetarians taste better" that kind of lesbian jokes. [laughter] (Fiona, Asian American, lesbian, 26)

Although the Subaru ad was likely to be enjoyed by heterosexual audiences for its message on female empowerment, the social and intertextual references of Subaru being a conspicuous sponsor on the most popular lesbian drama and a popular car among lesbian consumers were invoked by participants, such as Fiona and Audra, to make sense of their gay reading.

Another example of lesbian window advertising is a 2001 Wachovia financial planning service commercial. In the ad, an older couple is seen walking down the beach, with the man's arm around the woman. Behind them are two middle-aged, average-feminine-looking women walking together. One of the women says, "Look at them, incredible." And the other woman replies, "I know." "I hope we are like them," the first woman continues. The other says, "In our 70s, we will have great grand children." Then she responds, "Maybe great, great grandchildren." They then exchanges a long thoughtful look, as the voiceover asks, "How much future are you planning on?" The two female characters were read as a lesbian couple by many of my female participants and the gay subtexts were believed as intentionally designed to appeal to the GLBT communities:

> There are obviously people in the world who are just going to be completely oblivious, and not understand that it is a lesbian couple. But I think it's totally queer…If you are fearful of the implication [of inducing a gay reading], why would you go that far, and to trick people? (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

Alice offered another example of lesbian window advertising that she also believed to be lesbian-targeted. It was a Yoplait yogurt commercial that featured the actress Leisha Hailey from *The L-Word*.

> And thinking about one commercial that is my favorite, it's a Yoplait yogurt commercial with a woman from *L-word,* which is so gay. They are sitting, wearing the white dresses, and talking and cheering, "Here is to getting out of corporate suits," "Here is to getting out of horrible shoes," and "Here is to getting out of child-bearing." And when I saw that, I was like, that's so gay! Everything in the ad was so gay-sounding. And I don't know if straight people would necessarily pick up on that. But to me, it is a clear representation of the life that we have. Besides, why would they use the woman from *The L-Word* if they are not targeting lesbians? (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

Implicit in Alice's interpretive narratives is the assumption that her gay reading is the "true" meaning intended by the advertiser, as proven by the use of a specific lesbian icon that is not well known to heterosexual audiences. While she was aware that most heterosexual audiences who do not watch *The L-Word* might have different interpretations, as they might not pick up those gay cues, Alice was assertive about her gay reading and her evaluation of the marketer's "real" intentions, arguing that the gay subtexts were strategically and purposefully designed to target gay men and lesbians, without alerting homophobic consumers.

Several connotative queer references in gay window advertising were appreciated for the marketer's insight into gay and lesbian consumers' experiences, pleasure, and concerns. Certain "insider clues" were identified by participants as the visual cues insinuating gayness. For example, the intimacy shown between the female characters, and more importantly, having a cat in the plot in the aforementioned Zyrtec commercial, constituted clear lesbian signifiers for many lesbian participants. When explaining her gay reading of the Zyrtec ad, Janice pointed out the inclusion of a cat in the ambiguous female bonding as a determinable cue.

> They have a cat! Definitely the cat [laughter]. Because every lesbian has to have a cat. I have two. Does that make me more of a lesbian? [laughter] And they are very close to each other. They live together. My gut reaction is, it's a lesbian couple. (Janice, Caucasian, lesbian, 35)

Almost all lesbian participants noted the insider joke that "every lesbian has a cat" when discussing the Zyrtec commercial, no matter whether they agreed with it or not. Some jokingly argued that "they have a cat, you know, that's the rule [for being a lesbian]"

(Bette, Caucasian, lesbian, 29). Pet ownership is considered as a common practice, or even as a ritual in the GLBT communities. For example, the national lesbian magazine *Curve* featured an article titled “The Truth about Cats and Dogs” in which a novice asks for dating tips.

> I have just come out and am learning so many things about the "life." I heard recently there’s a deep connection between cats and lesbians, but I’ve been seeing a lot of lesbians with dogs. Are cat lovers more often lesbians than dog lovers? I have one cat. Would it help me to find a girlfriend if I get another cat? What if I had three cats? And are there colors or types I should be looking for, to attract more women? (*Curve*, May 2006, p. 20)

The presence of gay icons and gay references in gay window ads was emphasized for rationalizing the belief that the ad was gay-targeted, and thus made participants’ gay reading a privileged insider reading. Consequently, some participants repeatedly argued that queer-identified audiences would be able to pick up the gay signifiers to decipher the “real” gay-oriented messages while most straight audiences cannot:

> Straight people might not get it. I am always surprised how oblivious they are. But we know there is more to it. We are in the know! (Marina, African American, lesbian, 44)

The privileged insider reading made participants feel being acknowledged and “favored,” bringing a sense of affirmation as well as illicit pleasure. As a version of dominant reading, the insider reading agrees with the ideological stance presented and has no trouble *accepting* the point of view portrayed in the text. It is important to note that theorization in most audience reception studies on reading positions—dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings—mostly focuses on the issue of agreement (acceptance/rejection). The rejection aspect, including oppositional readings, and

sometimes negotiated readings, has been conceptualized as demonstrating higher levels of audience subjectivity through viewers' active confrontation against the hegemonic ideologies encoded in texts. In contrast, the complexity of audience subjectivity of the dominant reading position is usually unnoticed. Demonstrated by the excitement of detecting a member of the "family," the sense of achievement from decoding gay reference, and the informing one's friends of potential gay ads, an insider reading of gay window texts is obviously a major source of pleasure, gratification, and empowerment for some participants. More importantly, while GLBT audiences brought their queer cultural knowledge to their readings of gay window texts, they are also constructed through these texts as "self-recognizing" gay audiences, substantiating and affirming their queer identity.

Althussser's concept of interpellation is useful in explaining the ways in which a text persuasively induces dominant reading from its target audiences. According to Althussser, interpellation is the way in which the subject (reader, audience, listener) is hailed by the text; to interpellate is to identify with a particular idea or identity (Lapsley and Westlake 1988). For example, if you respond to a calling of your name, you would interpellate that salutation to mean yourself. If the viewer gives a co-operative response to the hailing, the she or he is constructed as a subject. In this way, the viewer who constructs meaning from the text is also constructed by the text. Especially in the case of reading obscure gay window texts, heightened interpretive subjectivity and insider knowledge are required to produce a gay reading, and reaffirms the viewer's queer subjectivity. Althusser also acknowledges that while the viewer could easily resist the

text meaning, resistance to the text code is far more difficult. At the level of code, the text presents what its target viewer perceives to be the dominant, the normal, and the taken-for-granted way of thinking.

In addition, participants' insider reading constituted the symbolic boundaries of a queer interpretive community, differentiating them from other heterosexual audiences. For example, Alice observed that many straight people can be unconscious of and very insensitive to gay icons and cultural references, reflecting a clear subcultural boundary.

> I am always surprised how oblivious straight people are. I am amazed how many straight people don't know the HRC sticker. They have no idea what that equal sign is… .Many straight people don't even know that we can't get married!... I feel like, I am so obviously gay. That's how I feel. But sometimes, the responses that I got…when someone asked me, "Do you have a boyfriend?"…I am just amazed how oblivious straight people are. (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

Alice was referring to a common gay symbol circulated within the GLBT communities, the yellow and blue equal sign logo of the largest national gay civil rights organization, which has been widely circulated in gay rights newsletters and local and national Pride events, and has appeared on many GLBT drivers' bumpers. It has been suggested that the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) equal sign has replaced the pink triangle to be the gay symbol of the twenty-first century.

The 1997 Da-Da-Da Volkswagen commercial is probably the most widely known and most frequently discussed gay window commercial. Many participants mentioned this ad as an example of a gay subtext commercial prior to seeing it in the interview. This commercial features two hip-looking young men, one Caucasian and one African American. They appear to be fastidiously concerned about the cleanliness of the car as

the passenger is shown wiping the dash. As they drive around aimlessly around town, they see an old, discarded chair and load it into the back of the car. As they continue their roaming, they begin to notice a bad smell and quickly stop to discard the chair once again. After that, they drive off just as happily and aimlessly as when they were first seen. They never exchange any conversations, but only two thoughtful looks when they detect the bad smell and after they throw away the chair, suggesting a tacit, mutual understanding and even an intimate relationship as Tyson explained:

> The tension between them is interesting. Something implied about their relationship. The way they communicate without conversation is like a married couple. It must be San Francisco because of the hills and San Francisco is a very gay city [laughter]. I remember when this was first aired, we were like "Are they gay? Are they gay?" I did talk to people about it and we all found it very suspicious [laughter]. (Tyson, African American, gay, 47)

As decoding gay window texts requires audiences' knowledge of the gay subcultures, it is natural that not every GLBT viewer is able to have gay readings. Discussing gay window ads and informing others of a gay reading thus function to negotiate status and membership in the community and maintaining in-group solidarity. For example, some lesbians might not have read the Volkswagen commercial as gay-suggestive, if not informed by their gay male peers:

> The first time I saw it, I liked it a lot. It was humorous. But [I was] not thinking they were gay at all. It was my gay guy friends who identified it as gay. And I remember not thinking it was a gay ad. Because several years ago, before the [gay] ads started coming out, there were not many. And I remember when this ad came out, my friends asked me, "Hey, did you see that Volkswagen commercial?" "What Volkswagen commercial?" "It was gay!" …You know, as a lesbian, I didn't pick up on that. But once I was told, "two guys in a car, looking for furniture," [laughter] I agreed it is not what straight guys would do, or what you usually see on TV. (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

Alice's gay reading is based on the discussion with her gay male friends who proclaimed the ad characters as a gay couple. Many participants noted social and media contextual factors that impacted their gay readings, especially when the ad alone was too ambiguous to alert their gaydar. For example, Justin (Caucasian, gay, 19) argued that being informed by his friends of the fact that the Volkswagen ad was aired during the coming-out episode of *Ellen* has persuaded him to read the characters as a gay couple.

The word-of-mouth information constitutes another form of insider knowledge obtained through GLBT audiences' social capital. Bourdieu (1984) defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 51). Collective evaluations of gay subtexts detected from mass media were found to be a common activity in participants' socialization with their peers. For example, Justine (Caucasian, gay, 19) also argued that discussing gay window ads were no different from their star gossip, speculating whether or not a celebrity is gay. It is the social use of advertising for communal bonding in which people with such knowledge are supported and such knowledge is legitimated.

Some participants not only found gay window advertising inviting, inclusive, and entertaining, they also appeared to be proving the subtle appeal:

> I can see why they made it so subtle, especially for a lot of cases in Texas…the gay laws and our rights, we are still outnumbered, and there are still a lot of people who don't want to risk being out, at their job or the community…they [the marketers] are playing a safe card. But that's ok. I can understand. (Daniel, Mexican American, gay, 37)

Daniel was referring to the constitutional amendment that was passed in November 2005, banning same-sex marriage in the state of Texas, only two months before the study. Three out of four Texas voters supported the amendment, which not only barred same-sex couples from marrying but also prevented the state from recognizing civil unions. The overwhelming vote in favor of the amendment was frequently commented on by participants as surprising, if not shocking, since the vote presented a sharp contrast to most participants' experience with the gay-friendly "liberal atmosphere" in the city of Austin. The hostile political climate was one of the repeated issues commented on by participants when rationalizing the "safe" gay window strategy:

> I don't know if a company would want to take a stance. Maybe in California would companies do something like that. For big national companies, I can't imagine them taking a stance on national TV because they would have to experience the backlash. It's too risky. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

As for the participants who not only produced the preferred gay readings from gay window commercials, but also consented to the cautious marketing mentality underlying the low-key strategy, they produced dominant readings through which they agreed with the ideological stance presented in the texts.

**Negotiated Readings**

Stam (2000) argues that reading positions are "multiform, fissured, schizophrenic, unevenly developed, culturally, discursively and politically discontinuous, forming part of a shifting realm of ramifying differences and contradictions" (p. 233). In a broader sense, every reading is a negotiated reading that pertains to a specific social and historic context, devoid of an essentialized, predictable, or invariable relationship between the media text and audience. Additionally, Cohen (1991) argues that audiences draw up intersecting, competing, and sometimes contradictory discourses in the construction of meaning. Any individual or group might operate with different decoding strategies in relation to different topics and different contexts. A person might make oppositional readings of the same material in one context and dominant readings in other contexts.

Gay window advertising presented a particularly difficult case of conceptualizing negotiated readings due to its polysemic structure. The reading process of non-gay interpretations by heterosexual audiences, especially those who are not affiliated with the gay communities, are more likely to be more straightforward, as the textual characteristic of polysemy may completely escape their consciousness. It is important to emphasize that sexual identification alone does not determine audiences' readings, since not all of my participants produced gay readings for all of the ads. As for the GLBT audiences who are more likely to detect the polysemic quality of gay window texts, their reading process may be more complicated, often involving the mechanisms of matching the gay subtexts with their subcultural knowledge of queer symbols and references, evaluating the

marketer's intention behind the subtexts, and speculating straight viewers' responses to the gay subtexts.

Although many participants were more affirmatory about their judgment of their readings, either the assertion of the presence of a gay vibe, or the absence of one, some participants were more hesitant when commenting on the gay window texts as gay-suggestive. Instead of arguing that the texts were purposefully polysemic to induce both gay and non-gay readings, some constantly questioned "am I reading it in the right way?" or "is it saying what I think it is saying?" (Jessie, African American, lesbian, 53). Through the process of verbalizing and rationalizing their interpretation during the interview, a conclusion was made in most cases, although some were left with a sense of uncertainty:

> I wish they had shown more, being more present, making more sense for me. Because it was like "Am I reading it in the right way?" It's just good to be reassured, "Hey, you are reading it in the right way!" (Audra, Mexican American, lesbian, 22)

Specifically, a negotiated reading is defined in Hall's encoding/decoding model as one that consents to the worldview informing the text, but at the same time, questions some of the text's ideological assumptions. A negotiated reader partly shares the text's code and broadly accepts the preferred reading, but also resists and modifies it in a way that reflects their own positions, experiences, and interests. When reading gay window ads in fashion magazines, Tyson negotiated with the perceived homoerotic imagery for his own viewing pleasure:

> Except *Will and Grace* and *Ellen*, I can't think of other gay images in mass media. But in fashion magazines, like in *Vogue*…it's just so homoerotic everywhere [laughter]. And to me, they are gay images even though they are not necessarily portraying that. Because they are two boys hugging, and they both got their shirts off, and they are selling jeans that they are not wearing. They are selling gayness if you ask me [laughter]. (Tyson, African American, gay, 47)

Many participants' ambivalent responses to gay window texts can be conceptualized as a form of negotiated reading. Different from the participants who approved the precautionary advertising strategy, many were concerned about the political consequences of the gay window, even though they also found the coded gay window texts welcoming and amusing:

> It's fun and I enjoy the insider stuff. But sometimes, I do get tired of all the subtexts. I think on one way, we get excited, "Are they [gay] or are they not?" But after a while, I am tired. Why can't someone just come out and be overt about it…It's interesting that they would expect us to pick up these gay codes, but they are not open about it…It bothers me. It's a little exploitive too. (Carmen, Caucasian, lesbian, 18)

The insider knowledge was not only employed when reading gay window ads, but it was also an important factor in framing participants' attitudes toward the brands. Many participants were able to enjoy the gay subtexts through their insider reading but were troubled by the perceived slyness. For example, knowing pet ownership is higher among the GLBT population, Alice formed a specific relevance between the product and GLBT consumers in her evaluation of the Zyrtec commercial. Being a marketing savvy consumer, Alice argued that the Zyrtec commercial was gay-targeted and yet, at the same time, felt discontent about the "closeted" strategy:

> I am a little upset about it, because I am an allergy sufferer, and I take Zyrtec. I know Zyrtec is the only allergy medicine that works with animal dander. I thought it was interesting that most gay people have pets. You know, I don't trust a lesbian who doesn't have an animal [laughter]. It's a joke that me and my friends have. But every gay couple or every gay person I know has a cat or a dog. So it's what bothers me…they are the only allergy medication that works with animal dander, and they know that many gay people have pets. I know business. I know this company got tons of money to research the market. Clearly they are recognizing the gay community, but to a certain extent, I am very aware that they made it subtle. I am very aware that they made it to a point, not to explicitly say that they [the ad characters] are together. I am very aware of that. (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

Consequently, a gay reading was articulated by Alice as she argued that the ad was gay-targeted. Yet, she questioned the privy strategy as she later argued for the significance of gay visibility on gay rights advances. Many participants drew from the political reality to stress the significance of having out and positive GLBT representations in mass media, and accordingly, held a more ambivalent or skeptical attitude towards the advertising strategy of courting the gay market only through connotative gay references:

> I am not offended by that, but sometimes, I feel it's [gay subtext] all we get, except those gay stereotypes, the gay caricature… I wish they could just come out and say it. It's important for us, and for the society, to see who is supporting the [gay] cause, who is willing to take a stance. (Helena, Caucasian, lesbian, 44)

Critiques that were politically framed were more likely to be articulated by participants who made a strong connection between GLBT visibility on mass media and the advancement of the gay rights movement. It was not only sexual identification, but also political identification with gay rights politics, that influenced the extent to which participants took a negotiated or a more critical reading position in relation to the gay window ads. However, this connection was not straightforward. Some participants

expressed a general opposition to advertising, although they also produced gay readings when interpreting the gay window texts. It is important to note that these politically informed critical readings may not necessarily be resistant readings or oppositional readings that challenge the dominant capitalist ideologies and social hierarchy.

More importantly, the underlying theme of the contemplation over gay-targeted or gay-inclusive ads in participants' interpretive narratives is the habitual speculation and evaluation of marketers' motivation and intention behind the advertising messages. While some participants viewed marketing activities and advertising strategies targeting or including the gay and lesbian market "nothing more than a business decision" (Shirley, African American, lesbian, 43), advertising texts were evaluated by participants as a convenient index of gay-friendliness to assess companies' policy and stance on the gay rights agenda. Identifying "family" and the need to differentiate between allies and enemies appeared to be a constant concern in participants' everyday lives, influencing their consumption behaviors and brand relationships. In the case of reading gay window advertising, the hinted gayness devoid of political references presented a problem for some participants' negotiated readings, and often resulted in an ambivalent or even suspicious attitude towards the marketers.

*Reading in Straight People's Shoes*

A common immediate response when interpreting gay window commercials was "I wonder how straight people would see it…." Upon detecting the possibility of gayness in texts, many participants speculated about heterosexual audiences' reading, almost as reflex. The consideration of others' (straight people's) perspectives constituted a

complicated negotiation process within which participants constructed their gay reading. It is unlikely for most heterosexual audiences, especially those who are not affiliated or not familiar with the GLBT communities, to constantly ponder GLBT audiences' readings. Most straight viewers were likely to accept their reading at face value without suspecting or knowing the existence of other reading possibilities in relation to sexuality.

Participants' tendency to gauge heterosexual audiences' readings, and the underlying concern of straight people's reaction to the hinted gayness, reflected their reading position as a marginalized minority who constantly face discrimination and oppression. This interpreting process may have mirrored many gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals' experience of discovering their homosexual or bisexual desire in a homophobic environment and of the simultaneous anxiety over being exposed. Upon realizing that some gay window texts involved unconventional gender cues that were often associated with gay stereotypes, Dana, who grew up in a military family with strong religious background, talked about concerns about her parents' reaction:

> When I see any gay images, I wonder how the conservative right-wing would respond…I guess I envisioned if my parents are watching...I always wonder what my dad's reaction would be. My dad especially is uncomfortable with the lifestyle. I guess when I see stereotypes or watch any kind of gay shows, I always just wonder what's his reaction would be….Sometimes I feel it's still a closeted world. When you see something possibly gay, you are like, maybe they are just experimenting. It's more in my head, asking what's the straight community going to say? (Dana, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

It is not surprising that the participants who expressed frequent concerns about straight audiences' readings usually came from a background of conservative religious families and had a difficult time coming out to themselves, or a relatively short history of self-

identifying as gay or bisexual, although the factors in no way were deterministic. Connected to their concerns about straight people's reading is the pattern of noting the "non-threatening" aspect of the gay representations, even when the gayness is only covertly hinted. When commenting on the Zyrtec commercial, Jessie appreciated the normalized "non-threatening" representations of what she believed to be a lesbian couple:

> Obviously two women live together and they share the same allergy….I think that would be definitely geared towards, or at least, us lesbians, would see that. I don't know that if the straight world would see them as necessarily gay. They could just be college roommates. …But they got the typical, the cat, built a bird cage together, doing things together. I didn't see any threats though. I mean, as a straight person, I don't think someone goes "Oh, it's two girls. Turn it off," because it was not that threatening. But of course, you got the typical, plain women, instead of a couple of bull dykes or some really butch women. So, these two women are neutral looking. They are not threatening to anyone. (Jessie, Asian American, lesbian, 53)

In addition to stressing the non-threatening dimension of GLBT presentations, participants who were frequently concerned about the straight perspective also appeared to be more inclined towards an assimilationist view of the gay rights movement. The assertion that "we are just the same as everybody else" is intertwined in their readings of gay window texts. Participants' meaning making of gay window texts thus illuminates their aspiration for social acceptance and the related stance advocating assimilationist gay politics.

**Oppositional Reading**

Literature on queer spectatorship indicates that queer readings of the presumably heterosexual mainstream media texts have been conceptualized as oppositional readings that reject the dominant heteronormative values and ideologies. An oppositional reader is defined as one that consciously views the text as hegemonic, but refuses the encoded dominant ideologies, and interprets it in a counter-hegemonic way (Hall 1980; Fiske 1993; Sender 1999). An oppositional reading can be liberating and empowering to oppositional readers, as their agency/subjectivity is elevated and asserted. This can be demonstrated by participants' interpretations of certain mainstream media texts:

> You want to see people that are like you even though not really….has certain parallel that you can look at it and appreciate. I don't think those parallels are always intentional…Even though it's not overly gay…has some themes, like "follow your heart" and "be who you are," even though sometimes they really don't want you [a gay person] to be who you are….but you can always look at things and see what you want to see. I don't think you need to read the way they want you to. (Kit, African American, lesbian, 19)

In the case of gay window advertising, because the texts are designed to appeal to a range of audiences, a gay reading as one of the polysemic readings is not necessarily a resistant or oppositional reading as suggested in previous research. This can be demonstrated in the cases where participants not only produced gay readings but also assented to the marketing strategy of "including gays but not alerting or offending the homophobic consumers," without questioning the political consequences and the potential of opportunistic exploitation. By conceptualizing gay window texts as

containing structured and intentional polysemy to include both gay and non-gay readings, a gay reading does not constitute resistance to a preferred reading.

However, GLBT audiences could also assume the preferred meaning of a gay window ad to be a heteronormative one. This can be the case for many GLBT audiences who have little gay cultural capital and interpretive repertoire and those who have internalized the heterocentric narratives as norm, or when the reading occurs in a hostile surrounding. The reading of gay window texts by a self-identified gender-queer participant presents a revealing case of the socially constructed and shifting reading positions in relation to resistant or oppositional readings. Pat self-identified as gender-queer and rejected identification with either side of the gender and sexual binary systems. Informed by the ideological frameworks of feminism, queer theory, and postmodern theories, Pat argued that sie[2] enjoyed deconstructing mainstream media texts when watching mainstream television. When commenting on the Zyrtec commercial, Pat produced an oppositional reading by assuming the preferred reading as a heterosexual one:

> I won't read them as gay, well, unless when I am at my parents' house. And my parents are still homophobic. So they are terrified of, well, of me. So I would pick up on *everything* [emphasized by participant] and read everything queer because it's like constant nervous that I am hyper-aware. (Pat, Caucasian gender-queer, 24)

[2] Sie is a transgender pronoun equivalent to she or he, and zir is used to substitute her or his. These pronouns are advocated by the transgender movement as neither convention pronouns fit in with their identity and anti-assimilationist queer politics. It is important to note that not all transgender/transsexual individuals use these pronouns, nor do all transgender/transsexual individuals reject gender binary.

An oppositional reader consciously sees the text as hegemonic and decodes it within a counter-hegemonic framework. Although Pat's example can also be considered as a form of negotiated readings, sie emphasized zir queer reading as a rebellious and subversive gesture challenging zir parents' homophobia. Additionally, Pat later criticized gay advertising and the underlying capitalist ideologies as sexist, racist, and class biased, suggesting an oppositional reading position. It is important to note that Pat's critiques were not informed by the framework of gay rights politics, but by queer politics, in which sie are not concerned with GLBT visibility or gay stereotypes, but with capitalist ideologies and the increasingly commercialized gay culture. Pat's gender-queer identity signified zir identification with queer politics, challenging the social dominance of patriarchy and heterosexism. Yet zir gender-queer identity also put zir in a further marginalized position both in the heterosexual mainstream and in GLBT communities, which might have influenced zir critical attitudes toward an oppositional reading of gay window texts.

Furthermore, in relation to their awareness of the textual construction of ambiguous same-sex relationships that varied from the heteronormative narrative convention, participants' gay readings indicate that these participants were using gay window texts to challenge heterocentric hegemony. For those who constructed their reading against the heterosexist narrative convention, their gay readings of gay window texts may constitute a form of oppositional reading against heterocentrism—the assumption that every one and every text is heterosexual. However, this version of oppositional reading does not necessarily challenge the other myriad and highly

intertwined systems of domination, including capitalism, racism, sexism, and class hegemony.

While gay window texts provide the potential and possibilities to confront heterocentrism, the actualized heterosexual readings, especially those articulated by GLBT audiences, demand further scrutiny. In his project of "queering film canons," Doty astutely argues that it is arrogant, and even homophobic (yes, gay people can also be homophobic), to only read blatantly gay-coded characters as gay. This internalized assumption is especially problematic as most explicit gay references have become tenacious stereotypes.

> In representation, as in life, you might never know for certain, as silences and gaps in information can be as telling and meaningful as what is said or shown. It is arrogant to insist that all non–blatantly queer-coded characters must be read as straight…where all we have is narrative silence on the subject of certain characters' sexuality (Doty 2000, p. 3)

Queer audiences' resistance to the understanding of "mainstream" texts as including the possibility for queer readings may be a result of heterocentrist colonization, if not homophobic self-oppression. The concept of the "heterocentric trap"—the tendency to read all characters in a text as straight unless they are "labeled, coded, or otherwise *obviously* proven to be queer" (Doty 2000, p. 3) [emphasis mine]— can also be applied to my participants' straight readings of gay window texts. However, in the case of gay window advertising, the heterocentric assumption reflects participants' mistrust of the fact that they could be targeted by marketers. It is worth noting that participants who did not fit into the extremely narrowly defined "gay dream consumer" profile, especially lesbians of color and transgender people, were among the participants who produced the

least gay readings in the interview study. Some of the participants who faced double or multiple discriminations also tended to be more skeptical towards marketing and more indifferent towards gay window advertising, although not in every case.

**Textual Cues and Queer Subjectivity**

Fiske (1988) argues that "the meanings and pleasures that are eventually produced are determined by the social allegiances of the person engaged in it, not by any preferential or possessive activity of the text itself' (p. 248). However, the textual structure was found to play an important role in participants' readings of gay window commercials. For instance, the plot of showing two adult women with a cat was interpreted by participants as playing with the insider joke of "every lesbian has to have a cat." Thus, participants' meaning making includes trying to identify the common textual codes, as well as analyzing the relationship, or relevance, between the textual codes and the participants' subjective position, personal history, and identity projects that make certain gay window ads more readily to induce gay readings.

Cultural cues that have been widely associated with gayness, such as figure skating, were employed in participants' reading of gay window texts. In a 2002 Bissell vacuum commercial, a bold, muscular, tough-looking biker with neatly trimmed goatee, outfitted in handsome leather attire is depicted as the benevolent leader of a bike club house. He addresses to the camera, "I love to keep a clean club. But the boys get so rambunctious sometimes." The camera then shows several bikers in the living room who shout in jubilation and spill their smoothie drinks. He continues to describe the product feature,

stressing its powerful cleaning performance. He then rolls the vacuum past a biker who sits on the white carpet, doing needle-pointing next to a poodle. Other bikers are shown watching figure-skating, arranging flowers, and drinking smoothies, instead of beers. Bette argued that men watching figure skating was the key pointer of gayness in this ad:

> To me, the tip off was figure skating. They are watching figure skating! I think if they were watching football, it would be just sort of a funny thing that really butch men also happened to be a neat cleaner, and it would just be a weird reversal. But the fact that they are sitting around watching figure skating, it, to me, says gay gay gay! [laughter] (Bette, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

Justin also professed that the male characters watching figure skating was the single most important signifier of gayness:

> Nothing about it says gay really hard, except they are watching ice skating….I am not a fan but I know a lot of my friends love it, probably because of all that sequins and glitter [laughter]. It is a very flamboyant sport…I also read somewhere that a very high percentage of professional [male] skaters are gay. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

The characters on the same Bissell commercial were read as gay by Justin for a different reason. The masculine biker image complicated with the unconventional gender performance was found to resemble the bear culture in the gay male community:

> For someone who knows the biker or the bear subculture in the gay community, there is a gay vibe there. I have seen the commercial before and I automatically assume it's a gay commercial because I am aware of that subculture. But now I am thinking about it more, I don't think it's something that a lot of people would be aware of….My parents will not be able to distinguish that man from any other Harvey Davidson driver. That bear, biker subculture, a lot of people just don't know….I thought they really tapped into the subcultural part of a community. It would appeal to people in the know. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

The bear subculture that is dedicated to "affirming large-bodied, hirsute gay men, known as Bears" (Johnson 2006) has attracted an increasing number of organizations, events, and publications. It has a growing prevalence in the GLBT communities, but largely remains unknown to the mainstream society. Troy, a graduate student researching human sexuality, also associated the main character with the bear leather representation. Troy further offered his description of the bear community in relation to the "mainstream" gay image:

> When I first moved to New York, I started going to the gay bars in the East Village. And at the gay bars at that area, there were gay men who were not muscular, who had hair on their body, who had piercing and tattoo. Some of them had belly that's not the conventional size. So that's one thing that really changed my view of what gay men should look like…because now I know it [bear image] existed, I like even less than before the gay images in gay magazines, since now I know there are alternatives out there. Also when I am growing older, I start to identify more with the bear community, which is part of the queer community, but also sort of a counter-culture community, compared to the mainstream gay image… The bear culture is usually defined as men who are larger, not always, but many of them can be somewhat overweight compared to the mainstream gay image. A lot of them are balding. A lot of them have their heads shaved. They even have facial hair and body hair. And they also dress differently. They don't wear much designer's clothes. They wear more like…associated with blue collar that type of clothing… I put myself in that category, people who are not in their 20s, who can't accept and don't accept that type of body images. (Troy, Caucasian, gay, 30)

Participants who were able to relate the unconventional biker image with the gay bear subculture appreciated the ad for the marketer's insight into a relatively unnoticed gay subculture. Moreover, because of the use of a lesser known gay image, the Bissell commercial was believed to be better advertising that appeals to both the gay market and the mainstream society:

> […] being able to represent that subculture without letting the mainstream society knowing it. It would appeal to the gays, but also it's something funny. It can also appeal to the heteronormative society. And I think it's really cool that they were able to target everyone at the same time. It appeals to everyone. It doesn't really exclude anyone, or offend anyone. (Billy, Jewish, gay, 44)

When decoding gay window texts, participants constantly compared the ads to conventional heterosexual narratives to construct a parallel for same-sex relationships; a parallel sometimes suggested in the text itself. Many female participants found the female characters in the aforementioned Wachovia commercial to be blatantly lesbian as the conversation implied planning their future together just like the older couple. Many female participants drew a comparison between the Wachovia plot and conventional ad stories that usually feature a heterosexual couple:

> To me, it's pretty blatant of what's going on there. I guess it can be ambiguous to some people. If it was a guy and a girl, it would totally of course be a couple. But if it's just two girls, they are just roommates [laughter]…I ask myself "if it was a guy and a girl, what would I think about it?" all the time. (Carmen, Caucasian, lesbian, 18)

Yet, the parallel suggested in the ad was lost in most male participants' readings that viewed them as sisters or siblings, or children of the older couple.

Subtle touching and physical proximity are also often used in gay window ads to suggest intimate and romantic relationships between same-sex characters. Participants frequently commented on the intimate same-sex bonding as suggesting a gay relationship:

> I remember there are some images of women, maybe in J. Crew's catalogues…I was surprised to see two women very intimately sitting together…I noticed that, and wondered. (Fiona, Asian American, lesbian, 26)

When interpreting the Zyrtec commercial, many participants commented on the intimacy portrayed between the two female characters as suggesting a lesbian relationship. However, physical proximity and the intimacy aspect of same-sex bonding were used only in the lesbian window advertising. In the gay window commercials that presented male bonding, the intimate, and potentially sexual aspect, was downplayed, if not erased, which is different from the prevalent male homoerotica in fashion magazines. Additionally, as the gay subtexts were often encoded by gender, participants' interpretations of same-sex bonding and the related definition of gayness were also gendered. Most male participants did not articulate gay readings from lesbian window advertising, while most lesbian participants did from commercials featuring male characters. Many male participants, and a few female participants, argued that female friendships are more intimate than men's. Hence, the intimate relationship between two women was often treated as norm without sexual connotations. For example, none of my male participants picked up on the cat in the Zyrtec commercial as an insider joke, and they tended to interpret the female characters as "just friends:"

> I think I will just see them as friends. Because the way female friendships are, more intimate than like, two guys. (Andy, Asian American, gay, 20)

When discussing recent gay visibility on mass media, many participants observed that the current media landscape of gay representations is male-dominated while lesbians largely remained invisible, except for a few lesbian celebrities. In a related vein, many argued that in conventional narratives, intimacy between women is more common as part of a heterosexual norm while showing an intimate relationship between men without the

contextualization of heterosexual romance is rare, and thus is almost always gay-suggestive.

> I think [showing] two men together is less common. That's why Sam and Frodo [in the movie *Lord of the Rings*] are so gay [laughter]….Also, when you go to a restaurant, you see two women, you don't automatically see them together. But two men, I am more inclined to think "oh, maybe they are gay." (Fiona, Asian American, lesbian, 26)

Another lesbian participant, Helena, further argues that female friendships are more intimate "in nature" since women, unlike men, are connected more emotionally:

> Women are more about the emotion. Just look at women's relationship with women, can men have friendship like that? And I think, if you were to take the social rules away, women would be more inclined to be bisexual, because they are more connected to the emotional side, to accept the person as a whole and dismiss the body they are in. Men don't. Society puts so much pressure on them. But some of it is hard-wired. (Helena, Caucasian, lesbian, 44)

Helena's definition of the female friendship reflected an essentialist viewpoint of gender and sexuality, arguing that female gender is inherently more emotionally inclined and female sexuality is more fluid than male sexuality. Helena's essentialist perspective also extends to her later discussion of homosexuality as she frequently emphasized that "It is not a choice to be gay," which was also asserted by other participants in their coming-out stories and in their discussion on gay civil rights. However, it was the social construction of gender and gayness that framed participants' reading of gay window texts. The invisibility of lesbians and the social construction of women as asexual or lacking sexual agency have made lesbian window commercials less discernable for gay readings.

Moreover, most marketing discourse on gay advertising, including gay window advertising, is predominantly male centered. The narrowly defined gayness in mass media and in the marketing discourse may have contributed to the gender difference in participants' interpretations. While most of my male participants were highly aware of the marketing efforts geared towards them and thus have developed a "gay consumer" identity, most female participants argued that the current model of gay marketing was male centered; some even felt alienated and found the development of the gay market irrelevant to their lives. The varied readings from gay male and lesbian participants indicate that the gay market discourse, within which lesbian marketing remains relatively uncultivated, may predispose GLBT participants to be more attuned to male gayness in advertising:

> I have noticed a lot of gay ads in gay magazines, but most of them are towards gay men…like alcohol ads…AIDS drugs, dating services, and Key West travel ads. I rarely see ads geared towards lesbians….It's about gay dollar, and it's about gay men's dollar. In this country, women still earn, like 80 percent of what men earn….Although *The L-Word* is about a group of power lesbians, it is not realistic at all. I don't know any women who live like that….They are targeting the wealthy ones in the community, mostly gay men. (Marina, African American, lesbian, 44)

Related to the ambiguous same-sex bonding, the absence of a heterosexual contextualization is another important textual factor in participants' interpretive narratives. When interpreting a 1997 Quaker Oatmeal commercial that shows two middle-aged men discussing breakfast cereal in a kitchen, many participants found the plot unusual and gay-suggestive:

> Most images you see are blatantly heterosexual, a man and a woman and a child. If you see two adults of same sex being together, and none of them mention their wives or girlfriends or kids, and I am so used to not having that, as soon as I see it, a flag goes up. (Troy, Caucasian, gay, 30)

GLBT audiences may have been culturally trained and encouraged to fill in the narrative void about a character's sexuality. With the long history of GLBT invisibility in the mass media, some participants were highly attuned to anything that opened up textual possibilities for gender and sexuality beyond the conventional heteronormative route of marriage, children, and monogamous partnering.

> At least for me, it's like, you've grown up all these years, everything is straight, straight, straight. Everything is geared towards the hetero life. So as gay people, we have to set up our own little fantasy or imagination on how we might have a different ending of that show; how might develop a character differently. It's all because we haven't had any outlets of our own. So when we see something that's actually going to be geared to the gay life, I think we feel, by that time, we are so expert at it, that we are good critics. That's why we get so excited when we see something that's even lightly geared to us., "it's like, alright, could it be? Could it really be?" (Jessie, Asian American, lesbian, 53)

Some participants made a parallel between their gay readings of gay window texts to their queer reading of other mainstream media texts, such as Jack's queer reading of classic films:

> It's similar to the situation that we talked about in classic Hollywood cinema…in terms of gayness, nothing says explicitly gay about Joan Crawford's films. But that openness in the film allows gay reading. And this is the similar sort of thing. Usually, they would have contextualized it but there was not contextualization of their relationship….The very absence of context, the very absence of trying to pin down this relationship, is saying "come on in, this is your carousel."…When there is nothing said, everything is being said. (Jack, Caucasian, gay, 35)

Furthermore, Doty (2000) argues that all people, queers included, often have intense "cultural and erotic investments in so-called mainstream and classic popular culture texts" and often these “Classic texts and personalities actually can be more queer-suggestive than ‘openly’ gay, lesbian, or bisexual texts” (Doty 2000, p. 1). Jack argues that he enjoyed classic films for crossing boundaries between straight and queer and allowing a more fluid reading position while he found most explicitly gay films boring and unimaginative:

> At this stage of my life, I would rather watch a film that is not specifically gay or films that focus on a gay character. In other films, no one was openly gay, like those classic films, but they seem more gay than those gay films, because of their form and the story they tell. Whereas the films geared towards the gay and lesbian audience, they are just sort of like, dead on arrival, nothing to work with, too overt, too cookie-cutter, too subconscious, like you can feel the movie wink at you and you are supposed to wink back. The films I like, the classic movies, they are much gayer, because they are more fluid. It’s a film that allows you to queer it. How can you queer a film like *The Broken Hearts Club* [a gay-themed romantic comedy], or *But I’m a Cheer Leader?* They are just, “here, I want to show gay people are good and they should be loved.” They are just boring, whereas the old films, like Joan Crawford’s films, you can move in and out, with her characters move in and out of masculinity and femininity. (Jack, Caucasian, gay, 35)

Jack thus argued that the malleability of gay window texts offer more possibilities for imagination and pleasure than explicitly gay ads which he found “less interesting, less arty, less fun.”

Other gay references frequently commented on by participants included the representation of unconventional gender roles and performances. For example, many participants found the reversal of traditional gender roles in a Bissell vacuum commercial amusing and gay-suggestive. The rare depiction of strong female athletes in advertising

for promoting the consumer profile of "women who know cars" in the 2000 Subaru commercial was also decoded as gay:

> She [Martina] is a well know queer, or lesbian tennis player. So it's decidedly targeted to gays. But on top of it, there is a whole butch issue. If I saw them on the street, I would probably pick out these women [as gay], not just because of the attire and mannerism, and also the whole conversation about cars. You know, heterosexual women are not supposed to know about cars, because they can depend on their men. (Shirley, African American, lesbian, 43)

Shirley's interpretation was based on a common stereotype that "women don't know how to take care of their cars." In this perspective, women who do not need men to take of their cars and who know about cars as much as men do are gay women, or rather, are butch lesbians. It is important to note that Shirley is a self-identified butch lesbian, or in her own words, "an aggressive lesbian," in a stable butch-femme relationship. She was also the most vocal about her butch identity among all the lesbian participants, as she often started a discussion with a standpoint "as an aggressive lesbian...." Later in the interview, she described the butch-femme role playing as an important part of lesbian culture:

> Although nowadays people are really loosening up, when I go to Foodies [a local lesbian social group], I can still tell, who is the more masculine one in the room…It's natural that someone takes, for lack of better words, a more masculine role…pay the bill, do the chores…and the other one would take a more feminine role. (Shirley, African American, lesbian, 43)

Shirley's strong identification with the butch identity may have influenced her reading of the Subaru ad as gay-targeted. Readings of gay window texts thus illuminated the reader's identification position and reflected his or her salient identity factors.

However, through Shirley's essentialization of butch/femme and gay/straight dichotomies, gay people (as well as straight) are identified by a set of characteristics that constrain the multiplicities of GLBT identities.

**Gay Habitus, Commodified Taste, and Gay Subcultural Capital**

Scholars have argued that sexuality as well as gay identity is socially constructed (Foucault 1978; Sedgwick 1999; D'Emilio 1983). Gayness must be continually produced and reproduced through myriad discourses, images, and practices created by the heterosexual society as well as by the GLBT community. Through the process of interpellation, participants' gay reading of gay window texts may in turn reproduce an identification position that enhances their sexual identity.

Additionally, consumption as a social practice is influenced by multiple identity discourses including gender, class, race, and sexuality. Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1990) have argued that consumption is a central part of identity formation. Therefore, to study the relationship between gay advertising and GLBT consumers' sexual and gender identities, scholars must investigate the social construction of gayness in gay advertising and among GLBT consumers.

Bourdieu's (1984) theories on class identity, taste, habitus, and their relation to consumption practices provide a useful framework to analyze how sexual identities are cultivated through marketing discourses and acts of consumption. Bourdieu's construct of habitus as a cultural structure that exists in people's bodies and minds describes how tastes shape the relations between the individual and his or her symbolic and material

contexts. Through the concept of habitus, consumer choices and individual tastes can be analyzed in relation to one's position within social hierarchies.

Bourdieu argues that habitus embodies the life conditions within which ideologies, hierarchies, and forms of identification are manifested through the choice of individuals. Habitus is highly intertwined with ways of living, one's sense of class, gender, race, sexuality, and other forms of cultural belonging. Reflecting one's social and cultural positions, habitus constitutes symbolic cultural boundaries separating an individual from other people of different positions. But more importantly, consumer tastes and consumption patterns are not mere results of a social position. Habitus is also the site of the reproduction of these positions. In his analysis of habitus cultivated by class identification, Bourdieu points to occupation, education, and gender as the dominant variables. Whereas Bourdieu focuses mainly on the cultural institutions of family and education in the formation of tastes, hierarchies, popular culture, mass media, and marketing discourses also play a crucial role. In the case of cultivating gay habitus and the connoted gay consumer taste, gay advertising, gay media, GLBT identity, and stance on gay rights politics all play an important role.

Crucial to the formation of a specific habitus is the development and accumulation of cultural capital. As social hierarchies are constructed, reflected, and contested through consumer choices and tastes, these choices and tastes are not arbitrary, but reflect a class-specific training or "cultural capital." Fostered by cultural institutions including family, education, profession, and media, cultural capital subjectively embodies ways of feelings, thinking, and acting, constituting a key element of habitus. Distinct

from economic capital (financial resources) and social capital (relationship, organizational affiliations, and networks), cultural capital consists of a set of distinct tastes, skills, knowledge, and experience. Also, cultural capital takes on a distinctive form in each field. Holt offered a clear example of cultural capital in the field of academia where cultural capital takes the form of expertise, research competence, and critical thinking. It is then objectified with presentations, journal papers, and books, and institutionalized in university degrees, faculty tenure, and research grants. Cultural capital thus embodies "the linchpin of a system of distinction in which cultural hierarchies correspond to social ones and people's tastes are predominantly a marker of class" (Thornton 1996, p. 10).

Extending Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, Sarah Thornton (1995) describes subcultural capital as the cultural knowledge and commodities acquired by members of a subculture that help them define their status within the subcultural group and differentiate themselves from members of other groups. Queer readings of mainstream media texts and the publicization of these readings within and beyond queer communities have provided a fertile source of gay subcultural capital. Skills for mastering queer readings as well as the appropriated texts enjoyed by many queer audiences are classified into the repertoire of queer subcultural capital. Camp, language use, manner of dress, knowledge of gay history, events, community, star gossips, and awareness of gay marketing and knowledge of gay-friendly or anti-gay brands, can all be conceptualized as gay subcultural capital, which produce consumer tastes that collectively form a particular gay habitus. When discussing coming out experiences and involvement in the GLBT

communities, Fiona noted a process of attaining gay subcultural capital through the consumption of cultural objects such as films, novels, and music, a process shared by many participants:

> Back in college, I was introduced to some queer folk musicians, like Ani DiFranco, and stuff like Lilith Fair…to go through a phase…exposed to new stuff, learning about the lesbian culture … Maybe it's through music that I was first introduced to lesbian culture….Like in my lesbian support group in college, when I first came out, people were like, "You have to see this movie, or listen to this CD….(Fiona, Asian American, lesbian, 26)

Similarly, Michelle talked about the passing-on of a gay subcultural capital to new members of the communities:

> When I was dating my first girlfriend, I was a baby baby lesbian. I was 19. And my friends all started talking about all these books and films that I've never seen or heard of. So they made me to go to a video store and rented like, every single gay and lesbian film that they could offer. So I spent the entire weekend, watching all sorts of gay and lesbian films [laughter]. (Michelle, Caucasian, lesbian, 24)

Many participants' also articulated moments of negotiating and demonstrating gay subcultural capital in their socialization with other gay people:

> I know gay men who definitely have no fashion sense, whatsoever, to the extent that I told him "You are going to give up your gay card, buddy," because he has no sense of design or style at all. He doesn't know what stuff goes and what doesn't go….And I know some gay women who don't know how to use a screw driver. And I am like, "Alright, that's it. You are giving up your butch card."….She needed help to fix something in the house, and I asked, "Where is your tool?" And she said, "I don't have any tools." And I am like, "You know what? Your lesbian card is being revoked. You don't even have a screw driver and a hammer in your house?" [laughter] (Helena, Caucasian, lesbian, 44)

Helena's references to "gay card" and "butch card" were metaphors for her definition gayness, while gay men's fashion sense and butch lesbians' expertise in mechanics constituted important gay subcultural capital. By questioning her butch friends' ignorance of mechanics, although jokingly, Helena demonstrated her ownership of lesbian subcultural capital and elevated her in-group status.

Participants' gay subcultural capital was brought into their processing and interpretations of gay references in gay window texts, demonstrated through their articulation of insider gay readings. Gay subcultural capital constitutes the textual and interpretative codes available to them as well as the skill to detect texts that employ them. Additionally, through the process of deciphering gay cues with their gay subcultural capital, GLBT audiences were interpellated by the texts, reproducing a gay subjectivity with a heightened awareness of the symbolic boundaries dividing the queer interpretive communities and the straight society. When reading gay window texts, many participants frequently questioned and argued that most straight viewers had no knowledge of the gay references and it was "a cultural thing" to get the humor of a campy movie, to enjoy drag performance, and to read certain ads as gay.

In the consumption fields, cultural capital is translated into tastes and the related consumption practices. Different amounts and types of cultural capital then produce different structures of taste. While Bourdieu is primarily concerned with the elite class' tastes of high culture, scholars have extended the theorization of cultural capital to the realm of mass culture (e.g., Holt 1998; O'Dair 2000). In the field of consumption, habitus organizes how one classifies the world of consumption objects available, forming desire

towards valued products and disgust towards the unvalued ones. The manifestation of habitus as tastes and consumption practices covers myriad categories of objects and experiences. The resulting consolidation of distinct consumption patterns including stratified lifestyles expresses, appropriates, and then reproduces the habitus.

Tastes, as the legitimated cultural preferences, are realized in consumer choices among multitudinous products, from fashion and home furnishing to body care and entertainment. In his study of the relationship between the rise of "family" magazines in the late 19th century and the emergence of a professional-managerial class, Ohmann (1996) argues that these family magazines had a pedagogical function, offering guidelines and training to help consolidate readers' sense of cultivating specific tastes in order to reflect their newfound status:

> The implicit offer the magazines made to their readers was of socially correct participation—reading the right fiction, seeing the new paintings, knowing who counted as a celebrity, having sophisticated views on the current theatrical seasons, and so on" (p. 245).

Scholars have claimed that in postmodern consumer societies, consumption patterns no longer act to structure social classes only (Holt 1998). The massive proliferation of cultural meanings and the fragmentation of identities have shattered straightforward correspondences between social categories and consumption matters. In the case of cultivating a gay habitus, many factors make the development of a universal habitus based on sexual identification impossible: the heterogeneous GLBT communities with proliferated queer sub-groups, the ongoing contention to define a gay, or queer, or GLBT identity, and the widely debated political beliefs. As Fejes (2000) argues,

> Gay males draw upon the various texts of heterosexual masculinity as the basis for the construction of their own identities, yet the end product is not simply a distorted mirror image of heterosexual masculinity. Rather the product is a deconstruction and recombination of its elements, reconfigured in such a away as to produce a multiplicity of identities—from the hyper-macho leather daddy to the effeminate, yet powerful dominant drag queen. (p. 114)

However, gay advertising, gay media, and gay-themed shows and movies have promoted the image of the "gay dream consumer," publicizing his (and sometimes her) tastes, pleasure, and concerns for both gay consumers and interested advertisers. Gay advertising thus helped to form and appropriate a dominant gay habitus embodied through a gay taste that is affluent, trendy, cultured, as well as white, upper-middle class, and generally male.

In order to further examine the construction of the dominant gay habitus, I reviewed twelve issues of the bi-weekly *Advocate* (December 2005 to May 2006). The *Advocate* is the largest national gay publication in the United States which was also the magazine that most of my participants subscribed to. The *Advocate* is positioned as a national gay and lesbian news magazine. Yet, in addition to its continuous coverage on global gay civil rights gains and losses, the editorials frequently reported gay consumer trends and gay marketing news. For example, a column called "Toys" covering latest consumer product and gadgets worked to promote desirable consumption. Numerous articles about gay and straight celebrities who had a big gay following as well as reports on the must see films, music, books, and plays promoted specific cultural tastes and functioned to consolidate an ideal gay habitus. The lifestyle-focused articles along with the publication's advertisements that promoted the gay dream consumer image

increasingly emphasized the role of consumption in defining a gay identity. The content cultivated not just a gay market, but a gay market with specific tastes, demonstrated by the concentration of lifestyle and image advertising of fashion, alcohol, travel, and home decor products over package goods.

As I have discussed in Chapter IV, the recent gayness constructed through gay tastes is deeply rooted in gay people's role as ideal consumers and accordingly, as experts of consumption practices. In particular, the cultural phenomenon of lesbian chic in 1990s provides a useful example to illuminate the consumption-oriented gayness. In contrast to the previous butch lesbian stereotype on mass media and in public imagination, recent fascination of the attractive, gender-normative, tasteful femme lesbians demands a critical analysis. The rugged butch lesbian image— no makeup, oversized flannel shirts, sandals, khakis and jeans—is associated with bad tastes or the lack of tastes. Given the configurations of our mainstream cultural landscape and marketplace, there is little room for those who are judged tasteless. Accordingly, butch lesbians are considered to be unattractive consumers, having no impacts on consumer trends, as a reported of *Advertising Age* argues "That's the marketing antithesis of the stereotypical lesbian, who supposedly wears a lumberjack shirt, sandals and no makeup and who does not set trends for straight women" (Johnson 1993, p. 34). The tasteless stereotype of butch lesbians was also noted by Max:

> Like in *Will and Grace*, the only lesbian couples are there to be made fun of. And they are very very butch. Well, they are not butch, they are just very rugged. And that pushes the stereotype that makes it even easier to make fun of them….it's like their hair is all messy and their clothing is so tasteless. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

In contrast, Ciasullo astutely observes that femme lesbians appear so often in commercial media texts not only because they are more acceptable and palatable for mainstream culture, but also for an economic reason; the attractive, made-up, tasteful femme lesbian image signifies her role as a "good" consumer, just as the well-groomed and attired straight woman does. Inness (1997) also notes that mainstream media tend to emphasize that "lesbians are beautiful, well dressed, and born to shop." In fact, the popular term describing a feminine lesbian—lipstick lesbian—clearly defines her through an association with a commodity.

Women have long been conceptualized as ideal consumers while men used to occupy the sphere of production. For example, women are argued to be the main shoppers in the household due to their conventional gender roles in heterosexual, nuclear families. Hence, consumption has long been femininized. Yet, it is femininity and the conventional feminine gender role that can fulfill the role of an ideal consumer; womanhood alone is not enough. A femme lesbian with her conventional femininity easily fits into this gendered consumption paradigm. The recent trend of gay male fashion and tastes has modified this deep connection between femininity and consumption, yet it reflects the increasingly commodified gay tastes and well as the consumption-oriented gayness constructed in gay advertising discourses.

Additionally, although gay identities are increasingly constituted through lifestyle for both women and men (Sender 2001), the elements of these lifestyles were very different. The ideal gay male habitus heavily involves vanity consumption. In contrast,

the dominant lesbian habitus appears to be more anti-fashion, folksy, and environmentalist lifestyle and tastes. When discussing the trendy gay male image, various lesbian participants explained that the lesbian community was more involved with artsy, cultural, and spiritual activities:

> My friends aren't into fashion and advertising. They are really out of sync. And they are not into the media. I don't think many of them even watch TV…I think lesbians are more into cultural [activities]…we tend to have this creative sphere, like artistic… [Michelle, Caucasian, lesbian, 24]

The marketing construction of gayness, and the dominant gay habitus to which many of my gay male participants belonged, might have predisposed GLBT consumers to interpret certain images more readily or more easily as gay, or to reject those unfit to the dominant gay habitus. In the Bissell commercial, the gay subcultural type of "Leather Daddy" or "Bears" is well delineated through their appearance, attire, and mannerism. At the end of the commercial, the main character is shown sitting on the clean carpet, rubbing it with a sense of satisfaction, and happy sighs, "It'll put any neatnik in hog-heaven." Yet, Troy, who has developed an increasingly stronger identification with the bear community, sharply observed nuances that contradicted his understanding of the dominant gay habitus, and in turn did not produce a gay reading:

> There are a couple of things not quite right. This is crazy, but I know gay men would never have carpet like that [laughter]! Because the carpet was gross [laughter]. And I think it's more likely to find tile or hardwood floor [at gay men's]. I know it sounds so crazy, yet I don't know why I think that way. Actually I have seen this commercial before on television, and I actually thought of this commercial. I think it's making fun of this big tough guy being so neat and sensitive about cleanness. That doesn't read gay to me, just playing on the image of a tough guy being sweet and sensitive. Not so much gay. (Troy, Caucasian, gay, 30)

Later in the interview, when commenting on his favorite brands, Troy explained his tastes for consumer products of high-end design:

> There are factors, like the design, I tend to buy things more of high design [laughter]…I appreciate things that have function and look nice. But I don't know if it's my identity as a gay man, or having an identity as being more stylish…(Troy, Caucasian, gay, 30)

Some other gay male participants appeared to share Troy's tastes and appraised the "guppie" image with as sense of identification. When commenting on the widely publicized notion of gays as big spenders, Justin, a business major, argued that it was not a fabricated myth, but a fact proven by marketing research, and an image that he found relevant and could identify with:

> Research shows that gay people, gay men, sorry, they spend spend spend. I am not sure if that's a perception or that something research shows…look at myself, I spend. If it's something research is showing, then it's not necessarily a perception, maybe a stereotype, but what's researching is showing in marketing is really important…gay men are more in tune with fashion….That's what's marketing research is showing. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

Gay male participants who were members of the dominant gay habitus expressed strong identification with the "trendy gay consumer" profile, by arguing themselves or their friends indeed traveled a lot, owned the newest gadgets, and cared for fashion. Max further explained his participation in gay marketing research:

> I recently got involved in a bunch of gay travel newsletters. We travel a lot. And apparently, I fit in the profile of gay men who travel a lot. I was on many consumer panels. I get interviewed all the time…they always sent me interviews. Like Montrose [the famous gay neighborhood in Houston] sent me interview; all the cities and places are sending me interviews because this is very important for them, because they know gay men have disposable income. And they love to

> travel, and they are very selective about where they travel. If you travel to somewhere you are going to feel threatening, you are not going to go there. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

In contrast, none of my female participants talked about conspicuous consumption practices among themselves or their lesbian friends. Some even argued, "I am not really into trendy pop culture stuff. I leave that to gay men" (Dana, Caucasian, lesbian, 29). But many lesbian participants were highly aware of this dominant habitus within the gay male community:

> My very best friend is a gay man, and he is fabulous. He is always into fashion, shops at the most fancy stores. He and his partner…They have to have everything that's brand new on the market. They have nice things, like nice clothes, nice furniture, nice apartment, nice cars, everything. A new thing comes out, they need it, and they need two of them in fact. They are like, gadget freaks [laughter]. (Michelle, Caucasian, lesbian, 24)

As can be demonstrated in participants' discussion on gay male consumers' tastes and conspicuous consumption practices, the dominant gay habitus is not only male dominated, but also upper-middle class stratified. Many gay men, and to a lesser extent, lesbians, who belong to the dominant gay habitus, also reproduce this habitus by introducing gay tastes to new comers to the GLBT communities. When talking about his early involvement with the gay male community after he came out in high school, Justin talked about the pressure to fit in:

> I think that might be a false image created in the community. When I was coming out in high school…I was introduced to the communities through friends…I thought I had to be more gay…how I dress, how I talk, how I look, how I walk, I felt there was a pressure on me to be more gay. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

Troy, who grew up in a conservative Southern Baptist town, thought he would find a gay community to finally "fit in" when he moved to Austin for college. Instead, the consumption-oriented mainstream gay habitus would prove to be oppressive:

> There was certain way of dressing, the hair, certain clothes, very mainstream. When I really started going to gay bars and stuff like that, I didn't really fit in what I would consider the mainstream gay community. It was a little more preppy, a lot of muscles, perfumed, very tanned, no body hair, designer's clothes…And I didn't fit in that mainstream gay community. (Troy, Caucasian, gay, 30)

Gay consumers' relations to gay window texts are also mediated by their relationship to the dominant gay habitus. Similar to the fact that the dominant gay habitus is specifically gendered, it is also class-coded, which can be demonstrated through Justin's interpretation of the Quaker Oatmeal commercial:

> It's morning and they are leaving for work, but none of them are wearing suits. They are blue-collar obviously. They don't seem specifically gay. I won't necessarily see them as a gay couple or anything like that. (Will, Caucasian bisexual male, 29)

Will rejected a gay reading based on the characters' working-class appearance which contradicted the upper-middle class tastes endorsed by the dominant gay habitus. Holt (1998) also argues that the expression of one's tastes reproduces status boundaries. Consumer tastes were brought into their readings of gay window texts, especially in judging the cues unfit to the dominant habitus. Additionally, some other participants found it unlikely that marketers could be aware of the bear subculture and rejected the possibility for this ad to be gay-suggestive.

It is important to note that the participants who questioned the use of the bear subculture or working-class characters as gay-targeted also tended to have a celebratory and often uncritical view of the "dream consumer" gay male stereotype. Their definition of gayness was influenced by the media portrayal of the affluent, fashionable, and cultured gay men, and "validated" through the widely publicized marketing research on the gay dollar. Consequently, participants' interpretations of gay window commercials might have been predisposed by marketing construction of "what it means to be gay."

The narrowly defined gayness in the marketing discourse as well as the gendered dominant gay habitus may have contributed to the gender difference in participants' interpretations. Many male participants did not articulate gay readings from lesbian window advertising, while most lesbian participants did from commercials featuring male characters. The varied readings from gay male and lesbian participants indicate that the gay market discourse, within which lesbian marketing remains relatively uncultivated, may predispose GLBT participants to be more attuned to male gayness in advertising.

Yet, there is no single gay habitus. Gender, race, class, age, and political beliefs, among other forms of social identifications, continue to diversify and segment the GLBT communities. It is the dominant gay habitus that has been extensively promoted and publicized by marketing and media discourses, and maintained and enhanced by members of the GLBT communities. The dominant gay habitus thus has become the most visible and influential version of gayness. In fact, habitus works as a self-perpetuating mechanism that reproduces social relationships. As long as an individual is a product of the mainstream gay culture and continues to live and function within the culture, she or

he will reproduce the habitus by enacting it and handing it down to new comers of the GLBT communities.

*Relevancy and Gay Readings*

The concept of “relevancy” is also useful in understanding why participants articulated gay readings from some gay window texts and not others. Fiske (1988) explains relevancy in the metaphor of text as a menu. “The viewer makes meanings and pleasures from television that are relevant to his or her social allegiances at the moment of viewing” (p. 246). Cohen’s (1991) study on gay male spectators’ interpretations of a teleplay *Tidy Ending,* written by and starring gay activist, Harvey Fierstein, found that the viewers’ knowledge of Fierstein’s works, oppression, AIDS, and issues of gay identity interacted in their gay-relevant readings of the gay-explicit text.

Jacqueline Bobo, also found the importance of relevancy in a group of black women's responses to *The Color Purple* (Bobo1995). Her respondents defended such films aggressively against outside criticism, stressing the value of having even "flawed" representations of their lives on the screen. All participants in an interpretive community don't necessarily agree about what a film means; interpretive communities don't impose rigid conformity, only set ground rules for discussion. The black women Bobo interviewed might disagree among themselves about particular characters or plot developments, yet they agreed on the film's relevance to the understanding of their daily lives.

In the case of gay window advertising, relevance is even more crucial when gay references are implicit. In many cases, participants generated gay readings of gay

window texts because the gay references were found to be relevant to them. All participants were aware of the phenomenon of gay advertising and gay marketing prior to the study. Many of them subscribed to gay publications, including *Out, Advocate, Curve, Girlfriends, Instinct,* and *Details*. These news and lifestyle magazines frequently include articles reporting the news and trends of gay marketing as well as ads from national marketers. Most of them were also aware of mainstream advertisers' involvement in the GLBT communities, such as sponsorships in gay pride events and film festivals:

> From reading magazines and being *educated* about the gay market from the marketing news, we know there is a trend targeting to gays and lesbians. And knowing that, I started paying more attention to advertising and companies that advertise to the community. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27) [emphasis mine]

Gay consumers like Max have learned to seek advertisements geared towards them. This awareness and knowledge of gay marketing may have predisposed them towards an interpretive position towards producing gay readings more readily. When commenting on his gay readings of the ambiguous Quaker Oatmeal commercial, Billy specified his competence in detecting gay ads, cultivated through the long exposure to gay marketing.

> I might have read it really carefully, but I think I have been trained to be very sensitive when reading media….I have seen many national companies' ads in gay magazines….It's nothing new. I am from New York. And it started a long time ago in New York. It must have started in the 80s, or a little before that….I have seen these images enough that I know if it is directly talking to me or not directly talking to me. (Billy, Jewish, gay, 44)

Many participants were media and marketing savvy consumers, frequently commenting on their business knowledge or professional background and their capacity to understand

advertisers' market research processes, business strategies, and ad designs. In this way, not only were the gay references found to be relevant, but gay advertising and gay marketing were also made relevant to the construction of ad meanings.

*Gaydar Alerts*

Doty (1993) argues that queer readings are not accidental or wishful misreading, but "result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular texts and their audiences all along" (p.16). Participants also emphasized that decoding gay subtexts requires a particular competence among GLBT individuals—the "gaydar" sensibility for detecting if another person is gay, bisexual or otherwise not heterosexual through subcultural references and heightened awareness:

> I am very observant to the cues. I don't think I am consciously looking for, as much as I catch them. And I think I catch that because I am so programmed to do that, always trying to figure out, is she gay or straight? I think that's where the gaydar comes in. If you are constantly doing that, then you have a very whole sense of gaydar. (Helena, Caucasian lesbian, 44)

Most participants explicitly equated their competence for decoding gay subtexts with gaydar. When commenting on a 1996 Kmart commercial featuring Rosie O'Donnell and Penny Marshall, Sharon argued that she used her gaydar to decode the gay references in the ad. In the ad, Rosie O'Donnell and Penny Marshall are looking at a diamond bracelet. Penny is amazed at the low price and says, "Kmart! Who knew?" "I knew," replies Rosie. "You never said anything," protests Penny. "You never asked." "What else are you not telling me?" Rosie answers, "Tons of stuff." "Like what?" "That thing." "Last year?" Sharon explained,

> They seem to be …using their own languages. But when you have gaydar, you can see it. Like, if you see a bunch of men together, you will still see the difference. You can tell if they are gay or straight. (Sharon, Caucasian, bisexual, 26)

When commenting on the ambiguous Zyrtec commercial, Alice also called it "a gaydar commercial" and argued that only gay audiences can detect the gay subtexts.

> It's a total gaydar commercial. Only a gay person can pick up on those things....I think gay people are extremely skilled at that….We develop that skill because we have to. It's no different than, back in the days, gay men had to wear a certain handkerchief as an identification system. (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

Similar to Alice's argument that that gaydar is a skill that GLBT people "have to" develop for finding peers in a world where they are the minority, Shane talked about the development of gaydar to find peers since the time she came out at age thirteen:

> Coming out at such a young age, I am used to looking for other people like me. So I am constantly looking for other gays or lesbians, especially the more "obvious ones." (Shane, Asian American, lesbian, 30)

Yet, similar to the fact that gaydar is far from infallible or universal among every GLBT individual, not all participants articulated gay readings of every gay window ads in the study. In fact, in contrast to Dyer's (2002) argument that traditional gay culture essentially refers to the distinct queer reading, participants discussed how the changing social and political environments, especially with the increasingly publicized gay sensibilities, have lead the mainstream society to be more aware of gay subtexts, including the conservative right-wing groups. Carmon offered an incidence of queering mainstream media texts even by the homophobic groups.

> I think if you are looking for it (gayness), you can find it, which is why so many people, including the Christian Right, persecute Sponge Bob. They felt that Sponge Bob portrays a gay character because he is single, and he doesn't have a relationship with another woman….I actually wouldn't have thought Sponge Bob as gay if they haven't said anything. They made him a gay icon [laughter]! The right-wing, right now, is very anti-gay and they are busy looking for more materials. So if you look for it, you will find it, even if you are on the other side of the issue. (Carmen, Caucasian lesbian, 18)

The publicization of gay marketing news has brought the use of gay subtexts in media and advertising to public attention. In various informal conversations with other heterosexual marketing students and faculty, many of them were aware of gay window advertising. Some even mentioned the Da-Da-Da Volkswagen commercial as an example of "subtle gay ads" that they learned from marketing trade publications. Although they may not have gaydar to detect nuanced gay references in media on their own, the discourse on gay advertising and the gay dollar has brought the possibilities of queer readings into their consciousness.

Participants' interpretive narratives of gay window texts demonstrated the importance of queer readings on GLBT audiences' lives, including personal viewing pleasure and empowerment, community identification, communal bond, and negotiating in-group status. Kates (2002) proposed applying the theoretical construct of interpretive communities for advancing brand or subcultural ethnographies in consumer research. He argues that consumers' various interpretations of brands and marketing communications may constitute interpretive communities based on their interpretive strategies. Kates Further proposed using interpretive communities as alternative form of lifestyle market segmentation. As demonstrated by various cases where participants failed to produce gay

readings, the nature and boundaries of queer interpretive communities are highly contested, unstable, and continuously shifting in response to the ongoing process of gay identity formation and maintenance for each GLBT individual, and the constantly changing social and political climates. A consumer segment based on an interpretive community, such as the queer communities, thus may be problematic for the traditional marketing paradigm that requires its market segment to be easily identifiable and reliably accessible and measurable.

Furthermore, although most marketing commentaries claim that gay window advertising is the safest and thus, the best way, to target gay consumers, the effectiveness of gay window advertising for brand recognition and recall appeared to be highly questionable. Many participants were heavily invested in decoding the gay subtexts and paid little attention to the product advertised. For example, when reading the Subaru commercial which features various female athletes, Shirley explained:

> When I look at this ad, it does imply that these other two women also might be gay, I don't even know who they are. That's what it does to me, I immediately not listen to the ad, but "hey, I wonder if they are also lesbians…" That what I though during the whole thing. [laughter] (Shirley, African American, lesbian, 43)

**Connotative Closet and the Politics of Coming-Out**

It is important to note that participants argued that gaydar is a skill that GLBT people *have to* develop. It is a self-defense mechanism against heteronormative hegemony. Similarly, gay sensibility and the practice of queer readings resulted from the GLBT invisibility and discrimination, as Dyer (2002) explains that gay men's campy

sensitivity is a by-product of the closeted experience of passing as straight, of disguising, and of appearing to fit in.

Participants' constant concerns about straight audiences' reactions also reflected the closeted experience that most GLBT people have gone through—worrying about being rejected, attacked, and discriminated against when their sexual orientation or transgenderness is exposed. Some participants acutely observed that gay window advertising mirrored the silent and invisible history of homosexuality:

> The very fact that they didn't say anything [anything explicitly gay in the ad], and the whole media history, they tend to stay away from being explicitly gay….Homosexuality is always about silence. (Jack, Caucasian, gay, 35)

Ironically, having considered the history of GLBT invisibility as well as marketers' concerns over possible boycott by homophobic groups, some participants were more sympathetic towards the cautious marketers and their low-key advertising strategy:

> Part of the gay culture is that a lot people are gay, and no one knows about it, like the actor [Rock Hudson] in the 50s, who was gay. People found about it only after he died. Even this ad is very subtle, but for us, it's part of what we have gone through. (Jessie, Asian American, lesbian, 53)

However, some other participants found the strategy problematic and exploitive. They argued that they would be more inclined to support companies who "come out and support the gay community" (Alice, Asian American lesbian, 34). Sharon, a gay rights activist and a public policy student, expressed her discontent about the "closeted" strategy:

> I think it is important for companies to put their name, their logo out there. That resonates with me in a more positive way…I have to read into it…They [the marketers] are kind of closeted about it. (Sharon, Caucasian, bisexual, 26)

This criticism points to the politics of visibility, as Doty (1993) refers to the encoded gay subtexts in mainstream media as "the closet of connotation." It is thus critical to remember that although queer sensibility—a consciousness of being different from the mainstream—and the related queer readings, have provided a creative energy for many GLBT people, it springs from the lived experience of social oppression. The culturally constructed gay sensibility and queer readings need to be reevaluated in relation to the changing media landscape of queer visibility, highly publicized gay rights agenda, and shifting political climate. While Dyer's (2002) argues that traditional gay culture essentially refers to the distinct queer reading, for the younger generations of gay men, lesbian, and bisexuals who will grow up with more media exposure to gay culture, knowing more out gay celebrities, and having more gay role models, the importance of gay sensibility and queer readings to their identification with the queer communities might be diminished, posing more unresolved questions of "what it means to be gay."

**"We Are Just Like Everybody Else"**

It is worth noting that the argument of gay window advertising being inclusive is often connected to the discussion of the normalized, "average-looking" or "straight-looking" depictions of gay people, although their gayness is only hinted in the ads:

> I am very surprised to know it's a Zyrtec commercial because that's a product for everyone, gay or straight. They [the perceived lesbian couple] were treated like a non-issue, just like other straight couples. The images are so normalized. They are just like everyone else. (Janice, Caucasian lesbian, 35)

While many participants were aware that it was unlikely for most heterosexual viewers to read the ad characters as gay, they nevertheless stressed the normalization of gay portrayals. In a related vein, participants repeatedly expressed their concerns about the stigmatized gay stereotypes, especially the images of effeminate gay men and aggressive bulldyke lesbians. Some of them further argued that they preferred gay window commercials to explicitly gay ones because gay window texts did not focus on the characters' gayness and were apolitical. When discussing the Wachovia commercial that featured two women talking about planning their future together, Marina argued:

> It's two women talking about their future together. I don't see it [being presented] as an issue, it's normal. It's not politicized like how gay marriage has been. Even though it's [the lesbian relationship] only implied…. I'd love to see more stuff that treat gays as norm, like, no big deal. (Marina, African American, lesbian, 44)

Marina later argued that "assimilation is the direction that gay rights movement had, has, and will have" and she looked forward to the day when being gay is no longer an issue. Strong aspiration towards normalization of GLBT representations, through which arguably gays can attain social acceptance and equal rights, emerged as an important theme in many participants' interpretive narratives.

Strong aspiration towards normalization of gay representations, through which arguably sexual minorities could attain social acceptance and equal rights, emerged as an important theme in many participants' interpretive narratives in both gay window and

gay-explicit commercials. This subject will be further analyzed in the next chapter regarding participants' reading of "out-of-closet" commercials.

**Chapter Summary**

The study of GLBT audiences' receptions and interpretations of mainstream media texts is based on assertions such as John Fiske's (1980) that "meanings are determined socially: they are constructed out of the conjuncture of the text with the socially situated reader" (p. 80). Lesbian, gay male, bisexual and transgender participants' interpretative narratives of the polysemic gay window texts demonstrated a dialectic interpellation between capitalist marketing ideologies and the GLBT consumers' identity project, community boundary maintenance, definition of gay culture, and stance on the gay rights politics. Participants' gay readings, based on the connotative queerness encoded in the advertising texts, illuminated "the subjectivity of ad experiences within the boundaries of the ad's sign structure and denotative content" (Mick and Buhl 1992, p. 317).

Beyond the realm of textual structuring, the dominant gay habitus alone with the gay marketing discourse promoting gay consumer tastes and the resulted affluent, trend-setting dream consumer stereotype might have predisposed participants' meaning-making of gay window commercials. Participants' dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings reflected their varied reading positions and their belonging or rejection to the dominant gay habitus. Additionally, reading gay window advertising texts was integrated into participants' socialization experiences within the GLBT communities where their gay readings were exchanged, circulated, contested, and legitimated. The consumption of

gay window texts extended beyond learning the product information, but constituted a source of pleasure, identification, and empowerment, and even to the realm of social movements where participants related the emergence of gay advertising to the advances of gay rights movements.

It is important to note that most audience reception studies mainly focus on the resistant or oppositional reading strategies when addressing audience subjectivity and possibilities of self-empowerment. However, GLBT audiences' dominant gay readings of gay window advertising in this study were found to bring them a sense of pleasure, gratification, and empowerment, illuminating the often ignored complexity of dominant readings.

Furthermore, while participants brought their queer subcultural capital to their readings of gay window texts, they are also constructed through these texts as "self-recognizing" gay audiences. Participants' GLBT identity is not simply invoked in interpreting the texts; their sexual and gender identities are also constructed around the ideologies that were found to be relevant and important in the process of interpellation, influencing their answers to "what it means to be gay" in American society.

# CHAPTER VI

## OUT-OF-CLOSET ADVERTISING AND THE POLITICIZED GAY CONSUMER CULTURE

With the long history of gay invisibility, the literature on queer spectatorship has predominantly focused on lesbian, gay, and bisexual audiences' queer readings of the presumably heterosexual mainstream media texts and how queer audiences use the reconstructed meanings to empower themselves (i.e., McKenna 2002; Whatling 1994; Tasker 1994; Reina and Rolley 1996; Dyer 2000; Doty 2002). With the increasing GLBT visibility in mass media and the cultural trends of queer-chic, the queer media landscape has been dramatically reconfigured, resulting in GLBT audiences' changing relationships with mainstream media text; these audiences no longer need to read against the grain. Consequently, they might be more sensitive, receptive, and susceptible to media representations catering to them. In particular, the explicitly gay-themed media texts, such as the "positive" portrayals of gay men as wealthy and trendy, of lesbians as sexy and attractive, and of bisexuals as adventurous, are likely to have critical impacts on GLBT audiences.

Scholars have pointed out that the development of the gay market is closely linked to a visible, articulate, and media-savvy gay movement and a proliferating gay publication industry (Alwood 1996; Penaloza 1996; Streitmatter 1995; Chasin 2000; Sender 2004).) The marketing implications of heightened consumer subjectivity thus are intertwined with political activism and American citizenship. Consumer choices are

increasingly influenced by politically framed ideologies, and the marketplace has become an extended battlefield in the flight for gay civil rights.

In this chapter, I evaluate how gay advertising shapes and responds to tensions between gay difference and sameness as well as tensions between assimilationist and radical queer political stances within GLBT communities. I critically examine the role of advertising, consumer rights, political beliefs and myriad identity factors in the construction of gay consumer culture through analyses of participants' reading of "out-of-closet" television commercials.

**Reading Out-of-Closet Advertising**

Although all of my interview participants were aware of the trend of gay advertising and gay marketing, only some of them had seen explicitly gay-targeted commercials on mainstream television. Many also observed that most gay-themed ads were aired on gay-friendly networks, such as Bravo and Showtime, and during gay-themed programs. Hence, participants who did not subscribe to cable television had only limited access to mainstream gay representations and usually showed more surprise than their counterparts with cable access when watching gay-targeted commercials in the interview study.

Early in the interview, some participants expressed indifference, skepticism, or disapproval of advertising and marketing. After watching commercials that featured explicitly gay characters or affectionate displays between same-sex couples or support of issues in the gay rights movement, many participants expressed surprise, excitement, and

exaltation, and some of them contradicted their previous arguments and formed a more favorable attitude towards gay marketing.

With few exceptions, most participants had never seen these commercials prior to the study. Consequently, they repeatedly inquired if these commercials were truly aired on national television and queried about the region where they were broadcast. Many of them automatically assumed these commercials aired only in gay-friendly states such as California, New York, and Massachusetts. Participants' locational analysis suggested that gay-explicit commercials were used as an index of gay-friendliness for constructing and reconfiguring their queer atlas.

Although out-of-closet advertising featured easily identifiable and arguably positive GLBT representations that were in sharp contrast to stigmatized gay stereotypes such as criminals, sexual predators, and pathetic victims, not all participants enjoyed these gay-explicit texts wholeheartedly, illustrating the complexity and heterogeneity of text-audience relationship. Some commercials were perceived as more realistic or positive and appreciated as such while others were considered "too gay" or "trying too hard" and generated suspicion. Additionally, some commercials were appreciated for the unapologetic, assured, and confident portrayals of gays and lesbians, while others were regarded as capitalizing on queerness for shock value. It is thus important to examine the textual, media, and social contexts for the varied reception.

In contrast to their responses to gay window texts, participants generally showed higher degree of appreciation and identification with out-of-closet advertising. However, while it did appear that many of my GLBT participants generated dominant readings and

praised the political validity of most gay-explicit ads, some did not. It is crucial to analyze the role of identity factors, social positions, and political beliefs in participants' interpretation of these gay-explicit tests. There was no consistent pattern among dominant readings across the gender dimension as many female participants could identify with various male-themed texts and many male participants found the positive lesbian portrayals equally affirming. Additionally, some participants of color appeared to appreciate the predominantly white gay representations without questioning the racial bias. The background of middle-class upbringing shared by most participants might have been a unifying factor in producing a class-stratified dominant reading echoing the upper-middle class values underlying the out-of-closet commercials. Yet, participants' contradictory political stances on assimilationist gay rights movement or confrontationist queer politics emerged as an influential factor structuring their dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings.

Additionally, among the various gay-explicit commercials, only very few were read as gay-targeted by all participants. Commercials that used stereotypes and sexual references were often considered as exploiting queerness for the perceived trendiness and exoticism and using queer sexuality as a novelty for either entertainment value or shock effect to grab audiences' attention.

**Dominant Reading**

The preferred meaning of out-of-closet advertising was a gay-affirmative message based on the capitalist notion of fulfillment, empowerment, and liberation achieved through consumption. Not surprisingly, most participants produced dominant readings through which they wholeheartedly accepted the texts' worldview in which being gay is normal, acceptable, or is celebrated. A 1994 IKEA commercial was praised by most participants**;** it was also the first ad in the U.S that dealt frankly with a gay relationship and was probably the most famous and widely acclaimed gay commercial despite the fact that it was broadcast in only few regions. This ad features a white, middle-class, average-looking, middle-aged gay male couple shopping for a dining room table as a symbol of their commitment to each other. In the ad, one character says, "Well you know we went to IKEA 'cause we thought it was time for a serious dining room table and…" The other interrupts, "We have slightly different tastes. I mean Steve is more into country. It frightens me but at the same time I have compassion." The first one chuckles and says, "We've been together about 3 years." "I met Steve at my sister's wedding…" Then they describe how sturdy IKEA furniture is, referencing to the stability of their relationship. The ad ends by showing them having dinner on the new table in a nicely decorated apartment. Michael expressed excitement and gratification when watching the IKEA commercial:

> "Is it really aired on national TV? Wow, we are represented in advertising! I love it. It's a representation of real life. You have two gay men talking about their life together….It's just awesome that we finally saw our representation because we shop there too." (Billy, Jewish, gay, 44)

Although creative works and alternative, non-stereotypical GLBT images have proliferated and become increasingly available in films and cable TV, most participants did not have access to those images and did not expect to see explicitly gay representations shown in mainstream advertising in a normalized, non-sensational light. Even the participants who held indifferent or negative attitudes towards advertising nonetheless found some out-of-closet commercials refreshing and progressive. Being more aware of the possibilities of finding gay-affirmative messages in advertising after watching some gay-explicit commercials, Fiona even stated that she would pay more attention to advertising:

> I am surprised to know these ads are actually played on national TV….I am a little surprised. I actually haven't seen that many gay ads. Although I don't watch much TV…I don't like advertising in general…I find it refreshing, and good for them, to show their support for gay people in public…I probably should watch more commercials now [laughter]. (Fiona, Asian American, lesbian, 26)

Additionally, portraying a financially comfortable gay male couple and showcasing their taste for furniture, the IKEA commercial echoed the dominant gay habitus and induced dominant readings from participants who belonged to this privileged group:

> I like it. These are middle-age guys, probably have careers….Obviously have enough money, have enough taste. I think it's a very positive representation. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

Another example that was well received by most participants was a 2000 commercial for John Hancock financial services, which was the first commercial that openly dealt with gay adoption rights and gay families. It was aired before Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage in the United States in 2004. The ad

shows two women in a crowded immigration office from which they are bringing home their newly adopted Asian baby girl. As they are waiting in the line, they coo over the sleeping child and say, “Hi baby, this is your new home…” Then one woman turns to the other and asks, “Do you have her papers?" The other woman responds, "Yeah, they're in the diaper bag." They smile at each other and say "Can you believe this? We're a family." The tagline of the financial services then appears as we continue to hear the women talk to each other: “You're going to make a great mom." "So are you."

Many participants found the loving portrayal of a lesbian family precious and comforting. Some female participants showed strong emotional reactions, deeply affected by the positive depiction of a lesbian relationship and the affirmative message on gay adoption. For Janice, who just got married to her 8-year partner in Boston and was planning on adoption, the John Hancock commercial was extremely touching and brought an unexpected emotional and tearful moment. After a pause to calm down, Janice explained her strong identification with the ad:

> The acceptance of married gay couple is new. I just got married in May [six months prior to the interview]….I think it’s a mix of shock that it’s being possible [on television]. That kind of loving, accepting, good portrayal of young gay couple like any couples with children, rather than being an issue on *48-hours*, is really rare. I don’t think I have seen anything like that. This is the intimate, close-up picture of it….We are considering having one [child] on her [her partner] own, or adopting one as well…we both feel very strongly about fostering a child…. Right now, typical situations, lesbians are going to China to adopt babies. I guess they are going to Guatemala too. So that reference works immediately as well. (Janice, Caucasian, lesbian, 35)

This strong sense of identification with the ad image provided an impetus for GLBT audiences to form a deeper engagement with the brand advertised. For example, Janice

continued to argue that "John Hancock is burnt in my brain now" and Andy declared, "I am actually darn proud that I invested in John Hancock" (Andy, Asian American, gay, 20). Other participants similarly stated that they were impressed by John Hancock's public support for gay adoption:

> I love it because I just feel there are so many people who think that lesbians and gay people should not be parents of children. So, it's really exciting to see insurance companies coming out of the closet and saying publicly that they support gay people, support them having families and support them having financial stability. I am going to tell all my friends about it. (Bette, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

A common theme emerging from participants' dominant readings of gay-explicit commercials is the discussion of realism. Jhally and Lewis (1992) indicate that a specific audience is more likely and in a better position to judge their media representations based on the criteria of realism. For example, middle-class viewers were more likely to evaluate what is realistic for a middle-class family. Morley (1986) also reports that working class viewers are more able to question the realism of working class TV characters. With the bombardment of negative and problematic gay stereotypes, GLBT audiences are more likely to be critical when viewing gay and lesbian images in mass media than to accept those images at face value. It is noteworthy that the gay-explicit commercials that were applauded by most participants were the ones that featured average-looking, gentrified, and de-sexualized gay characters, and many participants began their discussions by praising the commercials for the "realistic," "slice-of-life," and "everyday" representations of gay people. Having approved the text's realism, participants expressed a sense of closeness and identification with the ad, resulting in dominant readings. For

example, when commenting on the IKEA commercial, Justine appreciated the commercial for its realistic gay portrayals:

> I can totally see it as part of our everyday conversation in a normal gay relationship….I know they probably were some advertising models, recruited by the agency. But they seemed to be in a real relationship. It's so rare to see a committed gay relationship on TV. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

Similarly, when praising the John Hancock commercial for its true-to-life depictions of lesbians, Janice related the realistic characters as someone she could identify with:

> They seem typical lesbians [with] cute short hair, hip….lesbians would know immediately that they are lesbians. Both of them are sort of that baby dyke, cute type. They look like in a real relationship. The slightly older woman, I can say she totally looks like a friend of mine. It was easily recognizable by me that both of them are lesbians. It's amazing that the portrayal is so real. You don't often see that in advertising. I wonder if they have a lesbian consultant or did some focus groups. I think they did do a lot of research. It shows their understanding. (Janice, Caucasian, lesbian, 35)

Related to participants' stress on the ad's realism was the theme of relevancy and identification. In many cases, participants generated dominant readings because the ad stories were found to be relevant or were something with which they could identify. When interpreting a 2000 Jolt Cola commercial, many participants argued that they could relate to the ad story. In this cola commercial, a young woman and a young man are shown in a convertible at a make-out spot overlooking a city. The girl asks, "I want you to be totally honest with me. When we kiss, do you ever, you know, fantasize that I'm somebody else?" The boy drinks the cola and looks at the girl, imaging her turning into a sexy adult woman wearing a tight-fitting tank top. After a pause, he denies, "No. When we kiss, you're always just...you." She innocently says, "I just wanted to know" and

drinks the cola. The surprising twist is when she looks over at him this time, the boy morphs into the same sexy woman he fantasized earlier. But in her fantasy, the sexy woman licks her lips and winks back at the girl. She exclaims "Wow," excited by her wide fantasy. The tagline of “Get a Jolt” then appears at the end. Although it is never clear in the ad if the young woman is bisexual, curious, experimenting, or a budding lesbian, most participants found the ad humorous, creative, and accepting of same-sex desire. Furthermore, those participants who read her as gay argued that they could relate the dating scene to their failed attempts of trying to date people of the opposite sex:

> It’s very obvious she is gay. She is imagining him as a sexy woman. I totally get that. I think that’s very cutting-edgy. That’s obviously gay-oriented. I definitely relate to it, on all levels…I guess because personally, having tried the dating thing, because that’s what you are supposed to do. And done what she did, I can totally relate to that. And I think a lot of gay people can. (Helena, Caucasian, lesbian, 44)

Not only lesbian participants could relate to the sexual fantasy and dating trial, several gay male participants equally argued that the ad reminded them of passing as straight by participating in heterosexual dating rituals when growing up:

> It’s not common to see a girl fantasizing about another woman or just have sexual fantasies at all. I think that’s powerful….My initial reaction was that she is gay because she is already fantasizing about another woman. But the fact of her fantasy and sexual desire, reminds me of, you know, passing, and trying all the dating thing when I was in high school. (George, Mexican American, gay, 42)

In addition to the gay-themed plot, explicitly gay images provided clear points of identification for participants to induce dominant readings. In a 1998 Levi’s commercial, a nerdy looking young man talks to the camera about a conversation with his dad in which he expressed how his neighbors disliked him and in the process of that

conversation inadvertently outed himself to his dad. Troy argued that he could identify with the character's slightly effeminate mannerism and geeky style, and accordingly produced a dominant reading:

> I can totally identify with this guy, the way he talks, and what he is saying. His mannerism, his voice is like a lot of gay men that I know. He was not a traditionally looking gay man in the media. He was more alternative looking and he is talking about how he is discriminated by his neighbors. And the story was funny. Levi's is cool. They always have cool ads. (Troy, Caucasian, gay, 30)

It is important to note that when reading out-of-closet commercials that focused on bisexuality and transgenderism, most gay and lesbian participants argued that "it's not my cup of tea" while others were able to enjoy the texts for the non-heterosexist message and through their group identification as a member of the broader GLBT communities. However, their negotiated readings also appeared to accept the non-judgmental portrayals of bisexual and transgender people at a more superficial and less critical level. In 2002 an Amstel Light beer commercial, a charming blonde woman is sitting in the middle of her male and female friends at a table having a good time. Suddenly, the woman looks surprised as the camera pans below the table showing the man and the woman sitting on each side caressing her knees. The woman then smiles to both of them as she feels truly flattered by both of her suitors. The narrator then announces, "At Amstel Light, we believe in having the best of both worlds...especially when it comes to beer." Many gay and lesbian participants enjoyed the surprising twists and some agreed with idea that bisexuals have the best of both worlds:

> I like it a lot, it's pretty funny…. And men and women, and both gay and straight can relate to that. Bisexuality is not my piece of cake, but it is for a lot of people. (Dana, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

Dana's comment on bisexuality reflected her own ignorance of biphobia both in the gay communities and in mainstream societies, and consequently, she accepted the seemingly celebratory representation at face value. A common response to bisexuality-themed Jolt Cola and Amstel Light commercials were statements that focused on the face value of the commercials, such as "It's funny, I like it" (Helena, Caucasian, lesbian, 44) or "I enjoyed the surprising twist…It's very amusing" (Tyson, African American, gay, 47), instead of reactions concerning the stereotypes or positive representations as had been the case for gay- or lesbian-explicit texts. Similar uncritical statements emerged again in most participants' reading of the 1996 transgender-themed Goodwill commercial. In the ad, a ultra-masculine low-pitched male narrator says, "You're not the man you used to be." We then watch an unseen person organizing traditional male accessories, such as barbells, golf clubs, a basketball, ties, and suits. "You've hung up your hightops. You no longer wear your hat backwards or sit and watch games. You have a ring on your finger, floral sheets on your bed, and designer suits in the closet. You're not one of the guys anymore. In fact, you're not a *guy* anymore." The person then picks up her bag of clothing and walks away in feminine high heels. The closing tagline then says, "Goodwill. For the things you no longer need. Many participants were extremely surprised to see such an explicit recognition of transgender people in mass media. Some asserted that this commercial was revolutionary and progressive through its acknowledgement of

transgender people's unique experience. Even though the male-to-female transgender character was only shown through her high heels, many participants praised the ad based on mere visibility and non-judgmental representation:

> I think in general, trans are always shown in like, totally rejected or weird. So when I see the commercial, it was like wow, they are accepting the fact that there are trans people. It's kinda a big statement. (Sharon, Caucasian, bisexual, 26)

These assessment were mainly focused on increasing visibility and raising awareness of bisexuality and transgenderism since these topics are even more taboo and invisible in both mainstream society and queer communities.

This Amstel beer commercial was also valued by many participants for its non-judgmental, queer-accepting message, which can be illustrated by Jessie's reading in which they appreciated the ad's affirmative approach to bisexuality as presenting a choice:

> My gut reaction is sort of "hey, good for them," for the possibility of putting a lesbian in there. What I like about is it presented that choice. The woman can choose "hmm, man or woman?" It's not like this man or that man? I like it that it doesn't matter to them. It's ok to be gay or to be bisexual. You got the choice. It's inclusive and I like that. I like that they are coming out and say it. (Jessie, Asian American, lesbian, 53)

When stressing the increasing inclusion and acceptance of gay and lesbian images in mass media, many participants conceptualized the media progress within a comparative framework of previous negative and stigmatized gay representations:

> It's good to see we are more accepted, being represented more in media. Like on *Survivor*, they now allow and have a gay person, just to add a little bit diversity, if not always the best friend who is tortured, if not always the lesbian murderer in movies. You know, they say, in the end, every gay person has to die or kill every body, or kill themselves. (Janice, Caucasian, lesbian, 35)

Using the still alive and kicking negative gay stereotypes as a bench marker, many participants found these positive gay portrayals progressive and argued for their political implications regarding social acceptance of gay people.

Through their appreciation of gay-explicit and gay-affirmative advertising texts, participants produced dominant readings. They not only identified with the presented gay images, but also proclaimed brand support and loyalty to the gay-friendly brands, and accepted capitalist ideas of exercising individual freedom and achieving self-fulfillment through consumption.

**Negotiated reading**

While some participants were ecstatic about having positive and normalized gay portrayals in mainstream television commercials, some found certain text codes and ideologies limiting and problematic. They partially identified with the images advertised but broadly accepted the preferred meaning and thus generated negotiated readings.

Most female and (female-to-male) transgender participants, and some male informants, pointed out that it was the male demographic that dominated out-of-closet advertising space and mass media in general. Some male participants were less critical about the gender bias and argued that the skewed representation reflected the reality of

"who has the money" (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27). Justine, who came out in high school but remained limited in his involvement with the GLBT communities, further diminished the contribution of lesbians (and other sexual minorities) in the gay rights movements.

> I feel there is a whole lot of gay [men] out there, but not a whole lot of lesbians. Being a gay man somehow has become more socially acceptable. I really have no idea why. Lesbianism is still much of a taboo. I can't understand that. Kinsey's studies showed that so much more women are sexually exploratory, so it's really strange. Society is more accepting of men and what men want to do. And men were the movement starters in a way. And so many years ago, there were gay men, but there weren't lesbian women. Gay was a man thing, there wasn't such a gay thing for women, until after there were gay men. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

Speaking from his male-privileged viewpoint, Justine took male dominance for granted without questioning the patriarchal hegemony in the mainstream society and in GLBT communities. It is important to note that Justine was fortunate and privileged to be accepted by his heterosexual peers—likely due to his white ethnicity, gender-normative behaviors, and upper-middle class upbringing—and he did not feel the need to be surrounded by a gay community. Because of his inexperience and little knowledge of the diverse communities and history, Justine might have formed his understanding based on media coverage. However, both mainstream media and major gay publications, such as the *Advocate*, mainly focus on the gay male image as representative of the heterogeneous queer communities.

In contrast to Justine, many other participants considered the gender bias problematic. However, learning from the widely circulated gay marketing news that publicized the wealthy (male) guppie demographic, some participants were able to

rationalize and accept the male-dominated gay advertising discourse by acknowledging the economic disadvantage of women:

> I think most ads, especially when you see alcohol ads in gay magazines, it's targeted towards gay men. So I think it's more a gender thing more than a sexuality thing. I feel a lot of ads in *Advocate* are targeted towards gay men.…When you talk about HIV drugs, alcohol, clothes, even vacation ads, except Olivia Cruise, it's mostly targeted towards men. Maybe because men in general, are looked at as a bigger consumer market. And I think that's a natural stereotype. (Sharon, Caucasian, bisexual, 26)

The dissimilar economic status and consumption pattern between gay men and lesbians was an issue relevant to many female participants' social experiences and was commonly discussed within the lesbian community. Many participants extended their observation of the male-dominated gay marketing discourse to the male-dominated gay social scene, especially the shortage of local lesbian bars versus the plentitude of gay male bars. Recognizing the uneven marketing attention to gay men and lesbians, Alice explicated the different consumption patterns among gay men and lesbians in terms of choice of profession and lifestyles:

> Women don't spend as much money as men do…on going out and drinking. One discussion I always have with my other lesbian friends is that women get paid less to begin with. When you put two women's income together versus two men's income together, it's a real difference. And women in this country still earn sixty cent to a dollar compared to men. And most lesbians' professions are more society-driven, a lot of social work…the job that doesn't pay a lot to begin with. I think that's just women in general. And when you get two women together, you are just talking about less economic opportunity. In terms of consumption in general, lesbians don't do the same things as gay men do and they don't spend the same amount of money. I read in a study that gay people in general make more money because they don't have kids so they can devote more time at work. But more lesbians have kids….(Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

In addition to the gender bias in gay advertising, the lack of racial diversity in out-of-closet advertising was also indicated by several white and non-white participants. Many of them have noted the dominance of the white perspective and representation in gay and in mainstream media, as Andy pointed out,

> […] mainstream society, even though it's viewing the subculture of GLBT community, still focuses on it being white. Even within the GLBT community, I think the ones the society shows that influence the GLBT community the most are white, not queer people of color, like Ellen DeGeneres, Melissa Etheridge, Elton john. The only queer people of color that I can think of, probably is Margaret Cho. But I am not even sure about her sexuality. (Andy, Asian American, gay, 20)

The skewed racial representations of the diverse GLBT communities induced some participants' ambivalent attitudes. While most participants appreciated the affirmative message on gay families in the John Hancock commercial, queer participants of color were sensitive to the issue of white American families adopting children from third world countries, as Shirley argued:

> I always have issues that it's always the white people adopting the baby from some third world country. (Shirley, African American, lesbian, 43)

Yet, some non-white participants articulated an optimistic and evolutionary view on the racially coded texts. For example, when commenting on the IKEA commercial, Audra, a Mexican American lesbian, argued that having positive gay images was the first step towards improving the quality of GLBT representations, including racial diversity:

> With more and more gay visibility, as the quantity improves, diversity would come along…so the quantity helps the quality a little bit, although it moves a lot more slowly. (Audra, Mexican American, lesbian, 22)

Kit similarly argued that changes had to start with the majority—the dominant white group in the GLBT communities:

> I think just like anything, it has to start with the majority and work your way…I guess most people would accept a white gay man instead of a black one. People are still debating about homosexuality in general. I don't think they are ready for queer people of color, or bisexuals, and transgender. (Kit, African American, lesbian, 19)

The same sentiment was held by Jessie who was born in Japan and adopted by her Caucasian parents. She grew up remaining an outsider to the white mainstream and lacking the support of Asian communities. Being part of the GLBT communities brought her a much needed sense of belonging, even though it was still white dominated:

> Queer people of color had the hardest time finding their own distinct group. I was always in the minority. That has been the biggest thing that I have been most conscious about. Because when people see you, they see the outside of you. They don't see that you are gay, or divorced, they only see you as an Asian. So it's been real good thing for me, even though they are all white, to become a member of a gay community. (Jessie, Asian American, lesbian, 53)

With an optimistic and evolutional view, Jessie and other queer participants of color were able to accept the predominantly white gay images in gay-explicit commercials. They negotiated with the text meaning by arguing that the current dominance of white representations was the groundwork and preliminary effort towards improving the racial diversity of GLBT visibility, reflecting their double or multiple minority position and desire to belong.

The evolutional view can also be applied to some lesbian participants' negotiated readings of the invisibility of butch and the over-representation of femme lesbians in

advertising texts. When discussing a 1996 Clothestime commercial that presented sexual tension between two feminine women, many participants reported ambivalent feelings. In the commercial set in the ladies' room at a club, a sexy blonde woman walks in as another feminine-looking woman is fixing her makeup facing a mirror. The newcomer checks out the woman in front of the mirror and says, "I like your dress." She says "Thanks." Then the newcomer emphasizes again in a clearly flirtatious tone, "No, I mean I *really* like your dress." Some butch-identified lesbians argued that they enjoyed the sexy, attractive femme images as appealing eye-candy although they did not identify with the portrayal and did not necessarily consider the ad as lesbian-targeted. Some others were more skeptical and argued that these sexualized femme images may have been designed to appeal to lesbians, but were more likely created for titillating heterosexual male consumers' sexual fantasies. Still some others viewed the presentation of lesbian desire between two feminine women as progressive since the current obsession with the femme lesbian image might function as an intermediary stage to prepare the mainstream society towards accepting lesbianism:

> It might just be we are in a transitional stage right now and they are using femmes to do that, to soften the society into seeing this whole other lifestyle. (Dana, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

Similarly, Marina explained that she has been more tolerant of flawed gay representations in mass media:

> Whatever it represents…I am tolerating that right now, because we are penetrating mainstream right now. So I am not really critical about what that is unless it's really bad. (Marina, African American, lesbian, 44)

In addition to the gender- and ethnicity-specific dimensions of audience reception, political stance emerged as an important factor in various participants' negotiated readings. As most participants interviewed were inclined towards an assimilationist direction of the gay rights movements, they tended to be more appreciative of commercials that featured normalized gay images, such as the IKEA and John Hancock commercials. Other out-of-closet advertising texts that involved gay stereotypes were more likely to elicit their negotiated readings. Participants articulated constant concerns about social misconceptions based on gay stereotypes and were highly critical of and defensive against the use of "negative" stereotypes. When commenting on a 2005 Orbitz commercial, many participants were annoyed by its use of effeminate gay male stereotypes. In the ad that uses a game show setting, we see a colorful door turning to reveal a man in a tight lavender shirt and white pants. The announcer says, "He is a travel editor from Miami!" And the man femininely grabs his chest pretending to be surprised. Another door turns to show a tall, handsome young man with his boyfriend clinging onto his shoulder. The announcer then says, "He has got a new boyfriend!" The couple is to take on the challenge of finding a hotel room in San Francisco with a mini-bar and gym. When the young man is trying to finish the task, his new boyfriend is shown playfully distracting him by toying with his ear and rubbing his shoulders. Although Justin was pleased with the gay-targeted advertising strategy, he expressed concern about the stereotypes used:

> It's a good thing that they are trying to appeal to everyone and we are not left out. But it also makes me a bit skeptical because of the images shown, again are sexually charged…it implies again the stereotype of gay men as queeny, flaming,

> party animals, and sexually promiscuous…I am glad they have a gay travel section. I would use it if I would make travel plans…But I am upset about these stereotypes. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

Tyson also criticized the stereotypes in this Orbitz commercial. However, he negotiated the ad text with the hostile political climate in the local legislation in mind, and thus valued the ad's contribution to gay visibility:

> I have seen this commercial before and I was very ambivalent when watching this commercial. I think it's cool to see gay people to be portrayed…For me, if you can see gay people on TV in Texas, it's positive. So that's positive because of invisibility. But it's also playing up the stereotype to the highest spirit as possible….They are very effeminate, wearing very light feminine colors, tight shirts. (Tyson, African American, gay, 47)

Social and political contexts emerged as an important framework which many participants invoked to make sense of ad meanings. Through their negotiated readings, participants enjoyed advertising texts even though they may not have identified with the images, or may have found part of the text codes problematic, or disagreed with the text's dominant ideological values. This can be illustrated by Jack's ambivalent response to the much acclaimed John Hancock commercial. Although he enjoyed the loving portrayal of lesbian relationship, he criticized the underlying capitalist values:

> It's cute. I appreciated it. But now what? We can get married and raise families, but now what? You know, the vagary of capitalism is much more than homophobia, but it's awkward for me to even say that….I have friends in Milwaukee who would be more than happy to be appealed to. I think that's part of American capitalist life. It's mixed feelings. I mean, capitalism reads harder than gay in this commercial. The gay culture is being commodified. You see these ads that are upwardly mobile. It's all just going to be very middle class, largely white, not radical about sex itself. (Jack, Caucasian, gay, 35)

Oscar, who questioned the assimilationist strategy of gay rights movement, similarly produced a negotiated reading of the IKEA commercial that featured a straight-looking gay couple:

> I will put this one in the category of political validity and I am glad IKEA did this. But they are too assmilationist to my taste. They are too country pumpkin, like upper class, totally clean, nice people. They are boring. They are about whether their dining table embodies their taste or not. Also in the commercial, the patting in the back is so straight. I can totally see a group of people behind this, like, "Is this too much to be shown on 7PM?" I can see the whole discussion that went behind that. It didn't feel natural. (Oscar, Mexican American, queer, 26)

Oscar's ambivalence towards normalized or straight-acting gay images reflected the dilemma of choosing assimilationist or confrontationist politics:

> I don't completely agree with that assimilationist view. I get very concerned with the discussion of family values and so on. I understand it's necessary to achieve the legal protection, but not at the expense of discriminating people in our own community. I remember this instance, one organization on campus invited Judy Shepard [the mother of Matthew Shepard who was murdered in an anti-gay hate crime]….Towards the end of her speech, she talked about some queer rally that she thought was too outrageous, like "I love them, but that's not what we are all about. We are normal people." She was basically saying it is ok to be gay, if you act *normal*, and white, and upper class. I got so disenchanted with her talk, so much for inclusiveness…Maybe because we have this very centralized religious Right, maybe the only way you can fight back …is assimilationist. But I think it cost us a huge price on so many other issues. (Oscar, Mexican American, queer, 26) [Emphasis by the participant]

Another commercial that drew mixed responses was a 1998 Virgin Cola commercial. In the ad, a gay male couple dressed in tuxedo is seen standing on a soap box that reads "Say Something" when they are getting married by a female priest. The ad is set on a barren beach without any formal wedding setting or decorations and is shot in a documentary format with poor sound quality for realistic effects. Alice negotiated her

viewing experience with the text that she found bland and arbitrary, but she appreciated the ad for making a public announcement supporting gay marriage:

> I am all for gay marriage, even though I don't care to get married. It's civil rights. This ad is more of a political value, not what makes me appreciate for a commercial….I like humorous, funny, or emotional commercials. The only thing that is resonated with me is now I know Virgin Cola is gay friendly. What I don't like is a quick gay image and then the product. There is no emotion, no story. It's good to see a brand making a decision to be that political, but other than that, there is nothing for me. (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

In contrast to participants' appreciation for realistic or average-looking depictions of gays and lesbians, some gay-explicit commercials were found "too gay" or "trying too hard" resulting in a suspicious attitude towards the brands advertised. The portrayal of explicit sexual tension and lesbian desire in the Clothestime commercial was found unrealistic but amusing, especially when women were not as commonly shown as sexually active. Yet, many lesbians found the flirtatious conversation unrealistic, "over the top." Shirley who self-identified as an aggressive lesbian enjoyed the sexual tension but argued that it was modeled on male fantasy:

> I found it very sexual, but I do like the ad. It's amusing. I can totally see it as part of the *L-Word* show. It's the same thing. But I don't find it realistic. It's not the way women around each other. It's men's way of hitting on a woman. It's just a male producer imaged how it's like. Being an aggressive lesbian, I can't imagine any woman with that much aggression. It's freaking me out really. It's not only sexual, but that's men's fantasy. (Shirley, African American, lesbian, 43)

In her negotiated reading, Shirley modified the text context to relate the ad to the lesbian-themed television series *The L-Word*, which was also considered to be appealing to heterosexual male audiences. In contrast to Shirley, Kit argued that the commercial

clearly played up gayness, and being unaccustomed to seeing such conspicuous portrayal of lesbian desire in mass media, she brought skepticism to her negotiated reading:

> It's funny because it's so gay….There is clearly a sexual tension going on...But I think it's too much for this commercial. It's almost like too gay. Why are you playing that up so much? It seems a little bit over the top, which makes it funny. They are trying too hard and it makes me slightly uncomfortable because it's so over the top. I guess I am suspicious...I guess because it's so much for a niche group so they played up in everyway possible can be… that's why it's a little weird. (Kit, African American, lesbian, 19)

Although Kit argued that "It's 100% for the lesbian community…The lesbian community would really enjoy it," she nonetheless felt unease with the over-sexualization of lesbianism. In her negotiated reading, she thus modified the text based on her understanding of a niche marketing strategy in order to justify her lesbian-targeted reading. Similarly, Helena negotiated with the over-sexualized text codes and broadly accepted the preferred meaning to enjoy being courted as a target consumer of mainstream marketers:

> Commercials are exploitive to some extent. Let's face it, why is a commercial there? They advertise because they want your business. But if they don't think you are valuable enough to have your business, they won't take the time and effort to write and produce the commercial. They wouldn't go that far if they didn't think you are important enough, to have wanted your business. (Helena, Caucasian, lesbian, 44)

Helena thus conceded the text's exploitation of lesbianism by accepting it as an inevitable characteristic of advertising. In contrast, Dana considered sex-appeal and sexualization as the principle strategy in fashion. Objectification of lesbians was consistent with that of straight women, and thus was found less offensive:

> I think it's pretty good if you look at most commercials for jeans, or whatever that's more targeted towards the straight audience, it's primarily based on sex. And along the same line, it's a pretty good equivalent one for the gay community. (Dana, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

It is noteworthy that, compared to female participants, more gay male participants accepted the exploitive quality of advertising, marketing, and popular culture. When commenting on the bisexuality-themed Amstel Light commercial, Andy not only argued for its potential of raising GLBT awareness, but also specified that popular culture exploited every image for entertainment value:

> Though it can be exploitive, but I think it can be a good sign that it's bringing awareness to the GLBT community into mainstream society and into mainstream culture. Instead of having a gay bar, back in the day, where you had a lot of dark windows, and the only entrance is through alley ways, to where they are able to see GLBT people on TV, and being celebrated, like *Queer Eye*, being able to culture heterosexual men, even planning their wedding….I know it's like using us in a way, but if you look at the society, that's the whole thing, we are using people, gay or straight, men, women…black, white, and Hispanics, you name it. That's what our society does…Like Britney Spears, we use her as a form of entertainment, through her music and through sexuality. (Andy, Asian American, gay, 20)

Andy thus implied that since "everyone" was exploited, it was a social norm rather than an injustice. Furthermore, his specific example of objectifying a female star in media and in pop culture as a common form of exploitation highlighted his male privilege. His argument was also entangled with a liberalist bias arguing that "everyone" was "equally" exploited, without observing the gender, class, and racially hierarchized dominance.

Arguments like Andy's were an alarming sign of the supremacy of hegemony. Gramsci assets the mighty hegemonic culture through which the ideologies of the

dominant have become the "common sense" of all (Storey 2001). Hegemony thus allows the dominant classes to persuade the subordinate to accept, adopt, and internalize the values of the dominant classes as norms. The oppressed thus help to maintain the status quo rather than revolt. Assenting to capitalist hegemony, some participants internalized exploitation as a socially sanctioned and enforced rule. In this perspective, being exploited by mainstream culture thus could be considered as a sign of social acceptance.

Participants' negotiated readings reflected the complexity of the text-audience relationship in which contested readings were constructed by various interwoven and contradictory identities, social positions, market and political ideologies, political beliefs, and lifestyle goals. In the ongoing battle for GLBT visibility and positive representations, many participants maneuvered the text codes by rationalizing the problematic aspects without questioning the ideological underpinnings. On occasions when they rejected parts of the text codes or questioned some of their underlying ideological assumptions, participants nonetheless found relevance between the ad text and their lives or analyzed the text in a broader socio-political context, stressing the much needed political implications and downplaying the confronted ideological contradictions.

**Oppositional Readings**

In Bobo's (1988) study on black women's readings of the film *The Color Purple* that tells the story of an abused, disadvantaged young African woman's struggle for self-empowerment, Bobo argues that audiences from a marginalized social status often hold an oppositional stance when consuming mainstream media since minority audiences

understand that “mainstream media never rendered the minority segment faithfully” (p. 55).

However, as demonstrated from the complicated ways in which gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender participants constructed meanings from out-of-closet commercials, the oppositional reading position did not come naturally and was not stable or predictable. Participants’ identity as a minority group and the experience of being discriminated against does not form, in most cases, the basis of an oppositional reading challenging dominant social structures. In fact, with their strong desire to identify, many participants produced dominant readings accepting not only the text codes but also the worldview when they were hailed by the rare gay-affirmative texts. Additionally, while most out-of-closet commercials predominantly concentrated on a white, upper-middle class, male image, female and non-white participants were able to tailor the text meaning to their interests, values, and experiences when enjoying the text, and consequently, they accepted its ideological assumptions through their negotiated reading. Some even argued that they were tolerant towards flawed GLBT depictions, “as long as it’s up there and everyone can see it” (Marina, African American, lesbian, 44). However, some participants were less tolerant and formed more specific criteria for what constituted “positive representations.” Still others were more critical either of unrealistic portrayals or of advertising and the overarching capitalist ideologies and thus, they produced oppositional readings.

The skewed representation of gay and lesbians in out-of-closet commercials, especially the ultra-feminine lesbian portrayals, were found unrealistic and unrepresentative by some lesbian audiences. While most Caucasian lesbian participants nonetheless enjoyed the tantalizing sexual tension between the two female characters in the Clothestime commercial, the over-represented white beauty standard and conventional femininity in gay advertising was found oppressive to several non-white lesbian participants, as Marina criticized,

> They are too thin, femme women with blonde hair. And all that says to me was that that's the norm and I am outside of that group. So to me, that's the norm, though that's not normal. I would appreciate more if they were heavy weight like me, and maybe difference races, or short hair because that way, that reflects the reality that I see. (Marina, African American, lesbian, 44)

Additionally, a general distrust of advertising, indicating a suspicion of it as exploitive and opportunistic in nature, was commonly observed among most participants. Previous studies also report that many gay consumers hold negative attitudes towards advertising in general (Burnett 2000; Tsai 2004). Most gay-explicit commercials were considered merely GLBT-friendly or inclusive, but not likely to be targeting the gay market. Additionally, some participants argued that advertisers were capitalizing on the gay culture and trendiness of the gay lifestyle as a way of selling their products. Accordingly, many out-of-closet commercials were considered to be exploiting queerness for entertainment value or sensational value to grab audiences' attention.

The 1996 non-alcohol beverage "Mistic" commercial that featured a young lesbian couple was often argued to be using gayness for building a young and hip brand

image instead of targeting the gay community. In this commercial which was produced by the same agency that made the famous IKEA ad, a cute young white woman declares to the camera, “Mom, Dad, if you are watching, I want you to know I’ve finally found the person I want to spend the rest of my life with. Mom, Dad, this is Jenn.” Jenn then steps forward into the frame and smiles. The tagline “Show Your Colors” then appears at the end of the commercial. Shane found the arbitrary association between gay people’s coming out story and the beverage exploitive:

> I don’t understand why does her coming out have anything to do with the drink? I think it’s using gayness as a metaphor for difference and being edgy because…the Mistic drink is colorful and different and cool, and like we people are different, colorful, and cool… The brand is like “Hey we are surprising.”…it annoys me. I am not a lesbian to shock people. (Shane, Asian American, lesbian, 30)

Interestingly, a 2000 Giggo car-selling website commercial that also presents a coming out story was similarly believed to be not-gay-targeted and thus raised criticism of exploitation. In the ad, a young man walks to his father and suddenly says, “Dad, I am gay.” When his father looks up, the scene is paused and a computer window opens up over the father’s face: “Adjust Dad's attitude” appears with a scroll bar that ranges from hostile to supportive. The arrow then slides the bar over to supportive side. The scene resumes and his father responds, “You know, there's a guy down at the plant that has a gay son about your age. I think you two would like each other.” The young man smiles with disbelief and says, “Thanks.” The narrator then says, “Wow, that was painless, like giggo.com, where you take control of buying a car.” Justin’s immediate response after watching this commercial was expressing disbelief and then criticism for using the gay experience to gain attention:

> It's taking something that we have in the community, and commercialize it and taking it as their own…I don't think it's targeted to the gay community. I think it's more like, exploiting us, to get attention, for national viewers. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

The dramatization of gay marriage in the Virgin Cola commercial was also found exploitive by some participants:

> I feel like we are being used by Virgin. You are saying something, you are taking a stance, and Virgin Cola is doing it to shock people. (Tyson, African American, gay, 47)

Commercials that focused on bisexuality often raised suspicion and concerns about exploitation. Underlying the criticism was the belief that bisexual people could not be the ad's target consumer as they were not included in marketers' narrow definition of the gay niche market. While most participants appreciated the bisexuality-themed ads for the non-judgmental presentation of diverse human sexualities and for increasing the awareness of GLBT communities, many argued that the subject of bisexuality was exploited as an advertising gimmick to attract heterosexual audiences' attention. When commenting on the Amstel Light commercial, which proclaimed bisexuality as "having the best of both worlds," Sharon, who self-identified as bisexual, argued,

> They are not really targeting bisexual people, mainly exploiting sexuality in general….It's exploitive when using the culture, or the concept, but not actually targeting towards gay people. We constantly see the exploitation of the concept of bisexuality, and mostly, women's sexuality….It catches people's attention….I think it's marketing towards men who are interested in girls being together. Straight people just take the culture and try to use it to be cool or whatever…it irritates me….Like, forever, they have been using sex to sell, and they are going as far as they can, pushing the envelop to see what they can get away with. Girls making out is like the new bathing suit. It was not taken seriously. (Sharon, Caucasian, bisexual, 26)

George similarly found the tagline perpetuating the association between bisexuality and promiscuity:

> In society in general, bisexuality...is just like a promiscuous person. That's what presented here. The best of both worlds in here is sexes, not anything deeper than sex. I don't think it opens more possibility for female bisexuality. It just grabs your attention for male viewers. (George, Mexican American, gay, 42)

The use of gay stereotypes often enhanced participants' distrust towards even gay-targeted commercials. Due to the prevalent stigmatization of homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism, some participants were highly sensitive to gay stereotypes. In particular, for assimilationist-minded participants who were especially concerned about political consequences of gay images in mass media, stereotypical or sexualized gay portrayals often induced their oppositional readings. For instance, some participants negotiated with the Orbitz commercial by rejecting the effeminate and hypersexual gay male stereotype but still applauding the gay-specific travel service advertised and relishing their role as a courted target consumer. In contrast, others were annoyed by the stereotypes and felt exploited:

> It's the flaming gay stereotype again and it's somewhat annoying. It's sexualized….I feel Orbitz is trying to grab the gay money…you are being exploited for money. You became this niche market. It's kind of annoying. I am very skeptical towards advertising. I am always skeptical that they are trying to create the image of what the community it. Tell you what to buy, what to wear….Mostly it's just this gross greed that they want the gay money. (Audra, Mexican American, lesbian, 22)

The Virgin Cola commercial that featured the heatedly debated issue of gay marriage was also found offensive by some participants. Although it was the first commercial which shows two men kissing, the documentary-like, non-idealized imagery was perceived as using the controversial agenda for shock value.

> They could have done that in a better way. They could have shown two guys very much in love, in a romantic way...They can show a very nice, and very noble of them to be supported by each other….I have been to four gay weddings. All of them were very nice, very sweet and beautiful….When they are having the gay marriage debate…on the news, they had a clip from a gay wedding and it was horrible. The camera quality was awful, the lighting was awful, the coloring of everything was horrible. People were ugly….The clip was horrible. This ad reminded me of that clip. Look at the framing, it was very weird. They could have shown a more positive portrayal. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

The ad's confrontational style and the use of gay marriage as a bold statement is thus considered offensive to participants who preferred normalized, uplifting, "positive" representations:

> I don't understand why gay marriage is shown here, to shock people I guess. To me, it's [gay marriage] so politicized and they are politicizing it even in commercials. It hurts because it shouldn't be an issue. (Jessie, Asian American, lesbian, 53)

According to Hall (1980), an oppositional reading uses an alternative framework of reference that fundamentally rejects the text's ideological assumptions. Participants who held a critical view against capitalist hegemony thus were more inclined to produce oppositional readings of out-of-closet commercials which were thought to be commodifying gay culture. When commenting on the Virgin Cola commercial, Jack

critiqued capitalism and advertising as exploitive and completely disengaged from the text.

> I am like, "Oh ya? Big deal?" It's so totally arbitrary. It's like, "Ok, gay people should be able to get married, and here is a Cola for you" or "Get married and try a Virgin Cola too." It's gross. But I think a much bigger problem is the capitalism itself. You know, they will take whatever they want, whatever they can get. This is really awful. In a way, it's exploitive, but mostly it's just this gross greed that they want the gay money too. The underline is capitalism as well as advertising is exploitive. (Jack, Caucasian, gay, 35)

Oscar also found the ad exploitive based on his radical queer politics and his objection to the appropriation of mainstream family values in dominant gay rights discourse:

> I think this ad is entirely exploitive. They are endorsing gay marriage, like, this is civilization, making a political statement, which a lot of feminists would say, it is patriarchal and should be done away with from the very beginning. It should not be something that gay people aspire to. In true radical queer politics, marriage wouldn't be something so central. (Oscar, Mexican American, queer, 26)

Pat, a transgender queer identified participant, felt equally skeptical towards political motivations of gay advertising and thus downplayed the significance of advertising:

> I am indifferent. I guess I am not interested in who they appeal to, I am interested in who they are supporting. You can go to some websites to figure out who they donate money to. Advertising would be a very small part of how I perceive a company. I don't care if they advertise to me. Everybody is trying to get my money. (Pat, gender-queer, queer, 24)

Although participants like Pat, Oscar and Jack understood the preferred meaning as social acceptance of gays, they questioned the normalized images and rejected the preferred reading. Based on an alternative framework informed by feminism, queer theories, and critical theories, they articulated critiques challenging capitalism as well as social

hierarchies based on gender, class, and race. This framework constituted a lens, among other identity-related lenses, through which these participants critically assessed GLBT representations in conjunction with their perceptions regarding other appealing elements of the advertisements. However this does not mean that all feminist- or queer-identified audiences would apply a critical stance toward all media texts at all times.

**Anti-assimilationist Queer Politics and Queer Liberation**

Most out-of-closet commercials carry a strong assimilationist message by presenting the most privileged group from the GLBT communities, and these commercials were generally appreciated by most participants. However, theoretically-framed oppositions based on queer theory and queer politics were voiced by a few queer-identified participants. They emphasized the necessity to move beyond the assimilationist gay rights politics that re-appropriate the existing social structure by extending heteronormative privileges to sexual minorities. They also criticized the narrow scope of gay rights movement as entangled in identity politics that prioritized sexual identity over other identity dimensions and in turn implicated with racism, sexism, and class bias. These participants were in an oppositional relation to the assimilationist gay advertising discourse and thus were inclined to reject gay advertising text and its assimilationist ideological values.

These participants' media experience was also radically different from others; they actively sought independent, alternative, or avant-garde films that provided alternative or subversive expressions of queerness. In particular, Jack's early involvement

with the subversive, queer-conscious performance of Rocky Horror show constituted a turning point during his queer identity formation and influenced his identification with the queer communities:

> […] the Rocky Horror Picture show, I was involved with that. That's why my high school year was so good…because I had this outlet. Every week, I went to see Rocky Horror, so I had this social network when I was very young. Even by the time I was 15, I have met transvestites and gay men…it was so many weirdo…it's a crazy vibe…you throw things, toilet papers, you threw back stuff. There are freaks…men dressed like women, women dressed as men, just weird people. They are different from the norm. It was very liberating…that was my epiphany. Here is where I belong, here is where I can be myself, to be more than myself, become more attractive, desirable, and all that. And it's really not about the film. It's the freedom, the abolishing, being silly, and not confirm to what's going with the screen necessarily…deconstruction of cinema-going. They were all over the place sexually, very funny, very honest, and very open, very wild. And I saw a lot of women, and it was the women who were really so fabulous, because they were really deconstructive. (Jack, Caucasian, gay, 35)

Jack's media experience with queer-conscious (not explicitly gay-themed) films became sources of empowerment, liberation, and affirmation and has greatly impacted his self-identity, his definition of queerness and his radical queer politics:

> In terms of films…specifically important to me growing up is *Kiss of the Spider Woman.* I remember I was 11 or 12 and trying to be masculine, to fit in, like to lower my voice, walk a different way. And for whatever reason, I saw this film…after seeing it, I was like "fuck it, I don't need to!" Maybe it was too tiring, to not being feminine and queer, whatever I was. Certainly the main character was so flamboyantly gay and he was the narrative agent. He had desires. *Rocky Horror* and *Pink Flamingos.*…because that's a film that lays out all the different propositions, like trying to shock you, and it's just the frank perversion, unconventional thing. It's such a radical film. (Jack, Caucasian, gay, 35)

Oscar who has read extensively about feminism, queer theories, and radical queer politics criticized the white, middle-class portrayals and its assmilationist view in the IKEA commercial:

> They are all about financial security, their tastes, their furniture, very white, very upper-middle class…very much like the current gay rights activism…it has been taken over by the establishment of this idea that "We are just like everyone else." "We just want to have a family," "We just want to live in a nice big house." It's geared towards mainstream….It concerned me…they are pushing the assimilationist view, which completely takes out the radial or political opposing ideas. (Oscar, Mexican African, queer, 26)

Jack also criticized the development of a gay market as an assimilationist construction that presented material satisfaction and the American dream as the ideal goal for gays:

> It's [the construction of gay market] more about the gays attaining that American Dream. What you see about the new gay lifestyle actually wasn't anything different from anybody else. It's still the upwardly mobile, middle-class identity. It's just a gay reflection on this old middle-class American dream model. It's assimilation but it's not open to everybody. Not everybody can attain this American Dream. Very few people can, gay or not. (Jack, Caucasian, gay, 35))

Jack's criticism against the capitalist American Dream reflects the class division implicated in the radical queer/gay assimilationist split within the gay movement. While the assmilationist gay rights politics utilizes capitalism, class stratification, and upward mobility for elevating gays' social status, radical queer politics recognizes class as a factor in gay oppression. In her book *Over the Rainbow: Money, Class, and Homophobia,* Nicola Field (1995) argues that since the 1990's, the "success" or "progress" of the movement has been increasingly defined by the growth of the gay economy. She concludes that capitalism uses "homophobia, like racism and sexism... to keep workers

divided from one another through prejudice, mistrust and an artificial sense of competition" (p. 109). Informed by feminism and queer criticism in academia, Oscar criticized the current gay rights movement as limiting, commercialized, and anti-feminist:

> Have you read Douglas Crimps' work? He is an art historian and wrote about his experiences with Act Up [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power**]** and the rise of the right wing conservative gay rights movement and how it took over and completely stole queer activism from 1960s and 1970s. While reading the stuff, I started feeling disconnected with the idea of gay activism. I feel it was very conservative, very white, upper-middle class, dominated by white gay male. And even before reading that, I was more invested in feminist theory. Ideologically, I would check feminism before queer activism. In fact, I wouldn't say gay activism any more. I no longer identify with that. I mean, in daily conversation, I would say "gay" because they don't understand the subtle distinction between gay and queer, while the latter has a more anti-capitalism or a more critical view of consumerism, which obviously has become important because we have disposable income and the gay culture has been commercialized. Everything is about the gay lifestyle…not radical, political subversion. (Oscar, Mexican American, queer, 26)

Consequently, these participants were indifferent or opposed to the gay marriage theme in the Virgin Cola commercial because they found the dominance of gay marriage rights in the assimilationist gay rights discourse problematic:

> I think the whole gay marriage thing is a little bit ridiculous. Not because I don't think people should get married no matter who they are, but because the idea of having to get married to receive all the rights and benefits…I don't think it should just be us in charge of our family, like the traditional two-person family. All we are doing is transitioning heterosexual marriage, mapping it on the queers…It's not queer, it's gay family. It doesn't have that radical possibility of, like, community family where there are multiple people…involved in the family or multiple people can be responsible for each other…the movement is just buying into this traditional mode versus looking at other issues that our community has…like marriage is largely a white middle class issue. Other issues more related to people of color are not talked about. And also like social healthcare rights would extend and take care of people at large, so you wouldn't need to worry about benefits. So many issues are not extended to people who are not middle-upper class anyway…the current GLBTQ movement…is taking from the

> heterosexual image, the traditional conservative image, and attempting to use it for our benefits, but it's not any way going to change society…it's about claiming that privilege from the enfranchised, from the privileged…..There are so many other people [who] are marginalized in a variety of other ways are not going to fit in that paradigm. (Pat, Caucasian, gender-queer, 24)

Scholars have indicated that a more radically queer project challenges heterosexism, patriarchy, capitalism, gender hegemony, and a sex-averse dominant culture (Sender 2001; Rubin 1984). Radical queer politics maintains that liberation for GLBT people must take place within the context of promoting the rights of oppressed minorities of gender, race, class, and capitalism around the world. Differences between this "inclusive" approach and a "gay identity politics" approach have been the subject of major political debates within the movement and communities while the assmilationist approach has been much more dominant and influential. Most participants in this dissertation research were unfamiliar with or had not heard of queer politics as an alternative paradigm for queer liberation.

When explicating the difference between gay and queer identities, Pat specified the inclusive politics beyond sexual identity:

> By saying queer, it's the radical…attempting to enact social changes for everybody, versus just for one group peer. We can use the women's rights movement for example. What happened was white women…they were saying, "Oh, we got white women the vote first, and we will worry about African American women's *later*." And like the split of the lesbian movement and women's movement. It's a continuing thing, people in the movement have a chance to say, we will worry about the mainstream of our already marginalized peer. (Pat, Caucasian, gender-queer, 24) [emphasis by participant]

Pat was referring to the conflict between lesbian and straight feminists in the 1970s. Although lesbian feminists have been a crucial part of the women's liberation movement from its early stage, some homophobic straight feminists were reluctant to admit or accept the presence of out lesbians and bisexual women in the movement. Betty Friedan, the first president of Nation Organization for Women (NOW) and the author of the pivotal *The Feminine Mystique* as well as other straight feminists argued that the movement's association with lesbians would hamstring its ability to achieve political change. They also worried that the image of aggressive, mannish, "man-hating" lesbians would offend society and cause it to oppose or dismiss the movement. In response, a group of radical lesbians took the stage of the Second Congress to Unite Women in 1970 to raise recognition of lesbianism and lesbian rights as a legitimate concern for feminism; this action became a founding moment for lesbian feminism. It is important to note that a number of founding members of the radical lesbian group, Lavender Menace, had previously participated in the Gay Liberation Front, but chose to leave it because of the male-dominated agenda. The continuous erasure of the more outrageous queer representations and the silencing of the radical voice in mainstream gay rights discourse and in gay advertising signify the ongoing struggle over insecurities and control of power within GLBT communities, a struggle that is evidenced again in the conflict between transgenderism and the assimilationist gay rights movements.

While transgender people have been participating in the battle fighting for queer liberation since its inception at the Stonewall riots, the mainstream gay rights discourse continues to ignore transgenderism. Many gay (and bisexual) people reject transgender

people to join in the communities, fearing that their further marginalized image would inhibit gay men and lesbians' efforts towards social acceptance. The prevalent transphobia in mainstream gay rights discourse and in lesbigay communities illuminates the strained definition of liberation and equality that assimilationist gay rights politics could confer. Oscar thus criticized the homophobia and various biases that are problematically implicated in the assimilationist gay rights movement:

> I become disenchanted with the gay rights movement which is trying to distance itself from transgender, transsexuals, or even transvestites. I think that's ridiculous all together. I mean, Stonewall started with the lower class community. And it was completely taken over by the assimilationist, upper class, white. I have met some gay men, they are just "Oh well, they are just different." I mean, the gay rights movement is very misogynous, anti-feminist. They are completely appropriating the mainstream narrative. (Oscar, Mexican American, gay, 24)

Additionally, most gay and lesbian participants held an essentialist view on homosexuality and thus argued that gay and lesbians should be not discriminated for being what they were born to be. This essentialist construction of homosexuality is the foundation of mainstream gay rights discourse in fighting for "inborn" civil rights. Yet, informed by the social constructionist queer theory and feminist gender theory, Jack challenged the essentialist view on sexuality:

> I think at the political front, [it's easier] to fight gay rights as a natural right, like innate, you are born with your rights. But day-to-day life, I don't think homosexuality is natural and I don't think heterosexuality is either. It denies the fluidity and possibilities of sexuality in a way that I think is oppressive. (Jack, Caucasian, gay, 35)

It is important to note that radical queer politics was clearly voiced and advocated by only three participants—Jack (Caucasian, film studies doctoral student, gay, 43),

Oscar (Mexican American, Arts history major, queer, 27), and Pat (Caucasian, literary criticism doctoral student, transgender, queer, 24). While a few other participants were aware of the existence of radical queer organizations, they felt ambivalent and doubtful about the effectiveness and feasibility of their confrontational strategies, and the participants were generally ignorant about the organizations' inclusive motive beyond identity politics. However, it is critical to point out the academic background of these queer-identified participants (and myself), reflects the roots and confines of queer theories in the ivory tower. After all, the privileged academic environment of studying feminism and queer theory constitutes a social privilege.

More importantly, on one side of reality is that the assimilation advocated by many gay rights activists is not open to everyone. On the other side, some people can afford not to assimilate. For many social minorities, everyday survival is an urgent and pressing need. The accommodationist strategy of assimilation thus constitutes a survival tactic through which social minorities can slowly yet gradually change the configuration of mainstream society. As Marina explained,

> Assimilation? Me in 1994 [when she first came out] and me now, have totally different perspectives. Me in '94 would say, "Yuk, why assimilate? How boring!" But now, having tried to survive and all on my own now, none of my family around or having anybody, that really changed how I relate to the general society. And if I want to survive, I have to adapt to things and I have to tolerate and accept things. Now I look at assimilation, that doesn't mean you are misleading, but you fall inside and you change the society according to your needs…If you are not in that mix, you are not going to be a part of it. (Marina, African American, lesbian, 44)

The split between radical queer activism and the assimilationist gay rights politics thus has continued to shape numerous aspects of GLBT consumers' lives, including self-identity, identification with the queer community, consumption behaviors, and their relationship with gay advertising.

## Revisiting "We Are Just Like Everybody Else:" Normalization and Assmilationist Politics

As Chasin (2000) astutely points out, the development of a gay consumer culture is closely aligned with an assimilationist ideology. The assimilationist discourse of gay advertising is demonstrated through its insistence on portraying gay men as cultured, trendy, and affluent, lesbians as attractive, and bisexual women as fun and adventurous. The continuous cultural exclusion and tabooing of the further marginalized and stigmatized butch-lesbians, bisexual men, and transgender people also suggests the non-confrontational appeal in gay advertising.

The assimilationist view was echoed by many participants' readings of gay advertising texts, such as the praise of the "regular guy" image in gay window texts in which the hinted gayness was not the focal point and was treated as a non-issue. More frequently and strongly, normalization and assimilation emerged as an overarching theme structuring participants' reading of out-of-closet commercials.

Participants' frequent notes on the non-threatening aspect of gay images presented in out-of-closet commercials directly signified their strong aspiration towards assimilation. For example, Justin reasoned the female characters in the Clothestime

commercial to be positive representations based on not only the perceived gender normativity but also the non-threatening appeal:

> They are normal attractive women. No one is really butch here. Both of them are really feminine women. I don't think anyone would be threatened by this. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

Jessie who constantly speculated about straight audiences' responses to GLBT images during the interview, also repeatedly noted the non-threatening aspect, such as in her discussion of the John Hancock commercial:

> I think more and more people are realizing gay parents are good parents…the whole dynamic that's turning us less and less threatening….They didn't show…people looking at them, "Oh my gosh, it's two women with a child." Even 10 or 5 years ago, it would be a lot more difficult. In fact they have gotten this far, it means they have been accepted. (Jessie, Asian American, lesbian, 53)

Additionally, participants who hold a strong assimilationist view of gay culture and gay rights movement unexceptionally appraised normalized gay images as "positive representations" with the characteristics of average-looking, non-sexual, and gender-normative characters. In particular, the IKEA commercial was the most widely acclaimed for its use of non-stereotypical and non-sexual portrayal and for showing a monogamous gay relationship. Max appreciated the ad for positioning gay couples as part of the "normal" mainstream society:

> I like it…they are acting like a normal part of the society. It's what you would expect heterosexual couple would say in the commercial. It's different from [what] you usually see on mass media. It's more positive….They are not in gay society, they are in mainstream society. They are functioning as a normal healthy couple. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

Max's repeated use of the term "normal" to describe heterosexual mainstream sanctioned values suggested an internalized homophobia that might lead to discrimination against other gay people who do not conform to the traditional gender performance. In his later praise of the non-threatening aspect of normalized gay images, he compared the agreeable portrayal with the more confrontational Virgin Cola "Say Something" commercial of which he disapproved:

> This is about their lives. They are functioning as a normal healthy couple. This is not about breaking boundaries and getting married as in the Virgin ad. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

Max was further queried for his opinion regarding Virgin Cola's dramatization of gay marriage and his perception of the current gay marriage right debate that rendered gay people as discontent rebels:

> It [gay marriage] got a lot of national negative attention, negative in the sense of a lot of people thinks this is a group of gay people that are fighting for getting married, whereas heterosexual congress men are like, "Hey, let's not let gay people get married." And we have to fight *against* that instead of fighting for it. I think it makes people see us…we are fighting for something, we are not happy with what we have, we are against society. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27) [emphasis by participant]

Stressing the values of normalized, non-threatening gay images, many participants argued that by showing normalized gay images that straight people could relate to or identify with, the straight majority would become more accepting of gays:

> I think this commercial [IKEA] is a good change. I think it will help transition more people into the mindset: "Hey, maybe this isn't be as bad. They are doing exactly what we did last weekend." It's making us a part of the mainstream, making us more similar to mainstream than what they think. Going back to the rights movement, it makes people think, "Why are people been treated so poorly

> when they are just like us?" There is always going to be a difference that separates us, but we are the same outside of that. It is what we need to strive for. It shows, "Hey, we are the same after all. We just happened to like guys." (Dana, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

Similarly, Alice argued for the political potential of the John Hancock commercial to narrow the perceptual distance between gay and straight lifestyles, especially through the emphasis on traditional family values:

> I don't plan to have kids myself, but I am drawn to any media that makes straight people see that gay people have the same worries, the same life. I think things like that can make straight people, who only think about gay stereotypes, actually have emotional connection with that….More gay people are forming families, raising kids. (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

As can be seen, participants who preferred normalized gay depictions were also more inclined to stress the authority of media in influencing social values. When commenting on the development of gay advertising as contributing to gay visibility, Janice argued,

> Our culture's stories are now told through the media. Our collective "this is OK" comes out when we accept what's on TV or the radio. So if you put something on TV or in a magazine or a book that's gay, and people don't complain anymore, then we've accepted it in general. The switch from outrage over *Ellen* to general acceptance of *Queer Eye* to being OK, with real gay people on *Survivor*, is evidence of the progression that it goes through. We are a media-dominated culture, and our values…are challenged and reflected in the media. (Janice, Caucasian, lesbian, 35)

In particular, advertising was emphasized for its penetrative and subliminal power of persuasion. Hence, the importance of being included in advertising was often underscored:

> We're in a capitalist country where we are bombarded with images for advertising's sake every second. We get more ads per day than TV shows, and they're repetitive. If *Queer Eye* gets into an ad, people see it over and over again and it becomes more subconscious what they're seeing, because on the conscious level we just see the product. If a gay person is selling it, it becomes more subconscious. If we get "gay" into our subconscious over and over again, seeing it consciously won't be a big shocker. (Michelle, Caucasian, lesbian, 24)

Normalized gay images were not favored by all, but considered by some as the best representation, such as George's argument that the best representation of gay families was the equally mundane everyday-life portrayal as everybody else.

> Our lives are as boring as anybody else' life….I guess the best images people can get about gay families are like the mainstream America although it's really boring. (George, Mexican American, gay, 42)

In a related vein, Helena expressed her desire to see gay couples being treated like straight couples so that being gay could be a non-issue:

> I want to see gay couples get along with straight couples. We are no different. We are part of a society just as they are. There should not be a big deal. If I see in a commercial…a man brings home flowers to his wife on Valentine's Day, I go "Oh…" [being touched] And I also would like to see, in occasional commercials, a woman brings flowers home to her wife, or a man brings his husband some flowers, and I go "Oh…", you know, and not care, because the emotion is all the same. (Helena, Caucasian, lesbian, 44)

In his discussion of bear subculture as part of the counter-culture, Troy also noted the aspiration of being part of the mainstream in the gay community:

> And there is a big part of the gay community that is involved around the mainstream. There are a lot of people in the community…their biggest desire is to be seen as normal and suburban as every other middle-class straight couple that you see on television. (Troy, Caucasian, gay, 30)

Furthermore, the connection between normalized gay representations and gay assimilation was made clear by Sharon, a gay rights activist and a public policy student:

> It's a longer connection than just consumer rights to civil rights. It's more, showing in advertising that normalizes who we are, how our families are, what we do, our adoption, to mainstream society, who then influences their politicians, who then influences those who change laws. It's reshaping culture and societal norms and values. In general, the more the better, we are being normalized, being able to assimilate, the better for the movement. (Sharon, Caucasian, bisexual, 26)

Sharon also repeatedly argued that it was through the route of assimilation that gays can achieve social acceptance and win equal rights:

> Although a lot of people are saying, we are different or whatever, I think in order to get recognition from mainstream society, assimilation is where that's going to come from. It's normalizing, assimilating us into mainstream society. And I don't think gay people should be afraid of that. Some right-winged people are saying "Gay people are trying to normalize." You know what? Yes, we are! It should be normal. It shouldn't be stigmatized. We pay our taxes. We contributed to the society. I am ok with saying, I want to be normal. You have to normalize through having children, growing a family, that sort of thing. (Sharon, Caucasian, bisexual, 26)

Sharon's advocating of assimilation was shared by many participants who argued that gay assimilation for winning equal rights and social acceptance was the most ideal prospect, even if that meant to forgo a unique subculture:

> The best thing that we can hope for is to be average. Some people in the gay community are afraid of losing their individuality and uniqueness. But I think, when we are truly accepted in the society, we will just blend in. when it becomes not a big deal, we all truly have the equality, and that might mean sacrificing our outrageousness. (Kit, African American, lesbian, 19)

Having constantly emphasized the significance of assimilation in attaining social acceptance, participants were inquired for their opinion on the consequences of

assimilation regarding gay subculture. Tyson thus speculated that the mainstreaming of gay culture might lead to the extinction of a unique gay culture:

> I think there is a diffusion of gay culture, like in those fashion magazines, and like on *Queer Eye*. Maybe there won't be a unique gay culture in the long run. (Tyson, African American, gay, 47)

Yet, with strong aspirations towards normalization and assimilation, Will was ambivalent about the niche marketing strategy and raised concerns of essentializing gay difference and enhancing the gay/straight dichotomy:

> I am not sure about how I would really feel about the idea of targeting or marketing to the GLBT community. Because I think it's essentializing the difference. It's drawing the line. We are on this side and you are on that said…we are designing something special to appeal to you, since you are different from us. It's appealing to the difference, instead of that we are all the same and equal. (Will, Caucasian, bisexual, 29)

Additionally, Bette argued that with the advances of the movement towards social acceptance and the loosening up of gender roles, the downplay and erasure of gay difference would reflect the reality that "we are just like everybody else."

> I am not sure that with the advances of the movement, when we gain the privileges and benefits of the mainstream and when gender performance is not that restrict, for example, when straight men can also behave feminine and all that, is being gay such a unique thing for femme or queeny gay men? I hope the gay culture will change to downplay the uniqueness…and that's what I predict the direction of the movement and what we can achieve five to ten years from now on… there is no such a big deal of being gay…we are no different from others. We can also have a family, buy a house, and have children…I know that coming out is a whole process that others don't have to go through, and might be the biggest part of gay and lesbian culture….But the point of coming out is to be accepted by the mainstream. (Bette, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

As can be seen, Bette defined gay culture through the characteristics of non-conventional gender performance, such as drag culture and the coming-out experience, a definition that was echoed by many other participants. While queer theories and other subcultural studies have emphasized the resistant and subversive characteristics of subcultures (Hebdige 1979; Hodkinson 2002), few participants construed gay culture as part of a broader counter culture, except for Troy's conceptualization of bear subculture within the gay male community. Bette further used the example of the Jewish and Catholic cultures to envision a multicultural society where sundry subcultures, including the assimilated gay culture, exist but do not stand out:

> Jews and Catholics have, to some extent, pieces of their own unique culture, history, traditions. But no one really cares all that much about it, just do what you do. (Bette, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

This multicultural or diversity perspective was commonly voiced in various participants' vision for assimilation. Yet, this multicultural view assumed that every subculture (and every minority group) is treated equally and rejects the varied configuration of different types of hierarchies. It is also connected to the middle-class ideology of individualism (Press 1991). For instance, Carmen explained the presence of subcultures on an individual level instead of questioning the power relations between the dominant culture and subcultures (Foucault 1990):

> […] everyone is different and everyone is unique…so we will have our subculture just like African Americans have their hip hop culture…there will always be similarities…but every individual is different…and we need to learn to respect each other's different values and cultures. (Carmen, Caucasian, lesbian, 18)

As scholars have indicated, American identity and citizenship has been reconfigured by multiculturalism (Owen 2005). Billy thus argued that niche marketing and targeted advertising reflected the multicultural American society and in turn appropriated the gay advertising discourse for affirming his citizen identity:

> America is different because it's a diverse society. China? Homogenous! There are no white people or black people in China. Everybody is Chinese. In the United States, it's a heterogeneous society. Every race, every color, every culture is represented here. So it's good we have advertising geared toward the gay community. There are enough gay people to satisfy commercials geared towards gays, just like commercials geared towards black, geared towards Latinos, geared towards just women, or men in particular. (Billy, Jewish, gay, 44)

However, although most participants argued that gay advertising would contribute to gay visibility and awareness and help social acceptance, Shirley, an African American lesbian, noted that the white-dominated advertising images promised a discriminatory social acceptance:

> There are certain images of gay men and lesbians…they are usually white, sometimes it's mixed race, but definitely there is one white person. They are always affluent looking and professional looking. I don't know if it's suggesting acceptance, or only marketing towards that group of gay people in the community. (Shirley, African American, lesbian, 43)

Additionally, while most participants believed that the affluent, trendy, and gay images could influence heterosexual mainstream's perceptions toward gay people and lead to social acceptance, gay advertising's insistent portrayal of the trendy gay upper class hides and distorts the everyday harassment, hostility, discrimination, and violent threats that many LGBT people face. The celebratory portrayals might relieve heterosexual viewers' guilt or responsibility for such injustice and inequalities. In fact, the gay dream consumer

stereotype has been utilized by anti-gay groups as an evidence for arguing that gays are not economically deprived unlike other ethnic minorities and thus should not be given "special rights."

While most participants felt strongly towards assimilation, it is important to note that only few of them have mentioned alternative movement frameworks, such as radical queer politics. Some of them were uninformed of the anti-assimilationist queer discourse or queer theories that foreground the intrinsic links between queer struggle and race, class, gender and sexuality. Mainstream gay publications, gay websites, gay media, and dominant gay rights organizations that constituted their key information source universally supported the assmilationist political strategy. Many of them were also unfamiliar with the history of gay liberations that aimed for social changes instead of social acceptance and more broadly defined liberation beyond the focus of homosexuality. Most participants held a rather singular and linear view of "gay rights movement" in the U.S. Hence, a non-assimilationist queer movement was not even a possibility in many participants' political frameworks.

Moreover, some participants compared gay assimilation to racial and ethnic assimilation in American history and accordingly considered assimilation and acculturation into the mainstream as the American dream. After continually stressing the role of media in normalizing and assimilating gays, Billy was asked to talk about his perspective on assimilationist politics. He answered with a rightly tone,

> It's [assimilation] the goal of America, isn't it? To assimilate! America discourages you from being too separate. America wants everybody to celebrate Christmas. I am Jewish so I would never celebrate Christmas in a religious way,

> but I'll buy Christmas gifts to people, I'll say Merry Christmas to people, just like how American celebrate Thanksgiving or Memorial Day…maybe it's a bad thing with Latino market that they are only in Spanish. It discourages people from learning English…if you don't want to assimilate, don't come to America, ok? That might say something about the United States that attracts people that we are all about assimilation. (Billy, Jewish, gay, 44)

Billy's assimilationist view applied to both his Jewish and gay identities and was further connected to his American citizen identity. However, speaking as an assimilated Jew, Billy aligned his ethnic identity with the white mainstream as he explained, "I am white, but not in the traditional sense, you know, I am Jewish", and was conferred the white-skin privilege. His Jewish identity was not linked to a minority social position, but part of the mainstream. Therefore, his assimilated Jewish identity along with his male and middle-class privileges might have lead him to overlook the reality that the assimilationist American dream was not an open possibility for everyone and not everyone could or desire to attain this American dream.

In comments endorsing normalized gay images, Alice further argued that her lesbian identity did not constitute a defining factor that differentiates her life from others.

> When it comes to watching gay media, normalization is something I appreciate. I want straight people to understand how normal our life is. There is a stigma that we are partying all the time or we are all about sex….Sometimes there is part of me that like to see gay advertising focus on just the normal part of being gay. When it comes down to it, being gay isn't that important part of my life. I go to work like everybody else. We have the same relationship problems like everybody else. (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

While Alice's argument reflected the multifaceted nature of personal identity and refuted identity politics that tends to essentialize and prioritize a single identity factor, it

also illuminated that it was her lesbian identity that deprived her of the legitimate rights and privileges that she otherwise "normally" would enjoy as a middle-class professional. Thus, it is important to note who readily has the most access to assimilation—the white, middle-class gay professionals—the individuals who would have been in the mainstream if not because of their gay or bisexual identity. Various white gay and bisexual male participants' emphasis on "We are just like everyone else" that illuminates that the social dominance of whiteness and maleness made the gay aspect of their identity the only marginalized part. In contrast, non-white participants and transgender participants noticeably made such statements less often.

The recent local defeat of gay marriage legislation might have enhanced participants' anxiety over social discrimination and in turn strengthened their aspiration for assimilation. Many participants explained that anti-gay legislation deprived gays and lesbians of marriage and adoption rights that are the primary barriers for gay rights movement; thus, assimilation was believed to be the most effective, if not the only, way to improve gay people's lives. Yet, the final destination of the assmilationist route is social acceptance, instead of social change. Framed by the hostile political climate, the aspiration and attempt of including gays in the existing social structures appears to be a reactive political strategy. Reactive assimilation can be observed from participants' concentrated arguments such as including same-sex couples in the extending definition of family values and de-sexualization of gay monogamy, as these issues were the most frequently used issues in anti-gay discourses. Participants' statements of "we are just like everybody else" or "we are normal too" when reading gay advertising texts were directed

at the homophobic majority, such as Andy's general opinion regarding the development of gay advertising and gay marketing:

> Although it has the potential of reinforcing stereotypes, but I see the way it is going is assimilating the GLBT community into the mainstream society, normalizing. "Hey, look, we are normal too." "We do have mutual monogamy." (Andy, Asian American, gay, 20)

*Straight-Acting, Heteronormativity, and Gender Hegemony*

It is important to note that the gender-normative aspect constituted a key criterion defining normalized representations. When interpreting the Clothestime commercial which most lesbian participants found unrealistic and overly sexualized, Max stressed that the attractive femme lesbian image worked as a corrective:

> It's a very positive portrayal because just the society in general, the perceptions of lesbians are either very very masculine butch lesbian women, or the slutty super models, and it's not lesbian in terms of sexual identity, it's lesbian in terms of promiscuity….And this ad doesn't reinforce either. You see two very attractive women who happen to be lesbians. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

Alice also agued that the Clothestime commercial could raise public awareness of the often mistaken or ignored femme lesbians:

> I think most people, when they think lesbians, they are thinking of real butch, kind of bull dyke. That's something they can recognize, like, "Oh, she is a lesbian because she looks like a boy." Whereas this commercial and…the *L Word* can be a good thing in the sense that there are a lot of lesbians that are mistaken for straight women everyday because they are not butch. They love to wear makeup and stuff like that. (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

In her critical analysis of mainstream culture's commercialization of lesbianism, Ann Ciasullo (2001) warns us that most mainstream representations of lesbianism are heterosexualized through the skewed media portrayal of femme lesbians who "are looking just like conventionally attractive straight women" (p. 578) and thus were often

not taken seriously. However, in Max's interpretations of the "attractive normal women" in the Clothestime commercial, Ciasullo's "straightened out" lesbians were considered to be "normalized" positive representations offering amelioration or correctives for remedying the threatening butch lesbian stereotypes. Dictated by the assimilationist appeal in mainstream gay rights discourse, a heterosexualization makeover within gay and lesbian communities by stressing conformation to conventional gender behaviors has been advocated:

> I think there is a movement within the community to normalize gay images. So there is a little bit of trying to get rid of the stereotype and show that you have gay men that look straight, and you have lesbians that look straight. It's normalizing, but also showing our community is that diverse. (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

Preferring the use of femme lesbians as a representative, Max was also more defensive against the use of butch depictions in media, even including the lesbian couple in the John Hancock commercial which most lesbians found realistic and identifiable:

> I don't know if I like the fact that they are both short haired, more butch, but I guess that's the way the general society associate the appearance. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

In a similar perspective, Daniel objected to the Levi's commercial that presented a slightly feminine gay youth talking about his neighbor's hostility:

> The whole thing of gay men talking effeminate or gay men having a very specific gay act or gay dialogue, that's something I don't like. (Daniel, Mexican American, gay, 37)

It is critical to note that the assmilationist gay rights politics often reinforce cultural exclusion and tabooing of the further marginalized and stigmatized transgender people which can be demonstrated through Max's transphobic concerns:

> Now you see a lot more…regular everyday gay people on our media. And that helps a lot. Because they are not just some really really blizzard person. In all honesty, but the people who make it worse are the transvestites and the transsexuals. Because that pushes the boundary so much. If you just have two guys or two women, have their own simple life, have their little family and go to work and go to their little home, they can deal with that. Or they can't deal with it, but they can accept that. It's just a bunch of simple people who lives their simple lives. But now you have people now push the gender boundaries, that's really pushes it too far for them. Underline is, you would go to a bar, hit on a woman, turn out not to be a woman, you know. I think it makes it worse. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

The favoring of normalized, straight-looking images obscures the fundamental assumption that gay people are appearing or passing as straight to gain access to the privileges sanctioned by the gender hegemony. While Alice argued that straight-looking images contributed to the diversity in the media landscape of gay visibility which was overshadowed by gay stereotypes, the skewed and narrowly selected "positive representations" are dangerous and problematic and are perpetuation the normalcy of conventional gender constructions; butch lesbians, bisexual and transgender people are pushed back to the closet of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman 1978).

It is crucial to point out that conventional gender representations, such as the more masculine gay male or more feminine lesbians, were frequently and predominantly described as "normal", "regular", and "straight-looking." In contrast, many participants were alarmed by the depictions of "flaming fags" and considered these images to be "not

regular guys." Even those who would put themselves in the category of "stereotypical effeminate" type also preferred the arguably normalized straight-looking images.

In particular, masculine gay male images were constantly termed as "straight-looking" instead of butch or masculine. Implicit in this wording is the belief among many people (gay, bisexual, and straight) that heterosexual men claim the ownership of masculinity. The hegemonic power of hetero-masculinity can also be understood in the social use of the term "straight-acting." It is predominantly used to describe gay men who are athletic, aggressive, averagely-muscular, and with traditional masculine traits such as unwavering low-pitched voice. The notion of hetero-masculinity is further complicated by heteronormativity (Warner 1991), a concept describing the manner in which heterosexuality is reinforced by cultural institutions and social practices as normative. The conjuncture of hegemonic gender ideologies and heteronormativity created the problematic equation of gender-conforming (i.e., masculine gay men) = straight-looking = normal or normalized, which can be demonstrated by many participants' accounts of normalized positive representations.

Furthermore, the heterosexual association with conventional masculinity and the rejection of male femininity bring an alarming reminder of persistent internalized homophobia and "sissy-phobia" (Bergling 2001), which can be demonstrated by Justin's strong reaction to the flaming gay stereotype. Justin's gender impression generally adhered to conventional masculinity, and he self-identified as "a straight appearing gay man." Earlier in the interview, he discussed his earlier experience in the local gay community as feeling pressured to match an ideal gay image. He then explained his

withdrawal from participating in gay organizations on campus due to the observed alcohol and drug abuse, and argued,

> My identification with the community is that fact that I am gay. I don't really have a lot of friends that are in the gay community. Joining a gay organization and putting myself into an area that's predominantly gay is stepping out of my comfort zone, which is kind of strange for gay men. But my comfort zone is what I'm used to, which is the heteronormative society. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

Later in the interview when discussing gay representations in mass media, he expressed concerns over news coverage including outrageous gay images, such as the flamboyant drag queens in San Francisco Pride parades. He also strongly condemned the flaming gay stereotypes on shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight guy* and *Will and Grace*:

> I really despise *Queer Eye for the Straight guy*. I can't stand it. The five guys are just perpetuating stereotypes and just trying harder and harder to reinforce stereotypes, the stereotypes of the flaming gay men, to get your attention. There is one character that is more "straight" than the others but the rest just try to act gayer and gayer. I can't stand that Carson character…makes me only want to hit him…He is just completely annoying, very very flamboyant …I don't like *Will and Grace*, especially the Jack character. He is so over the top. He is there to make the joke or drama. Even the other character, Will, is also made more feminine to fit in the gay stereotype of being sissy effeminate. I think it's really misrepresenting gay America to those who don't really know about it. I can imagine someone who never met any gay people in their life and they are like, "Look at these gay people, they are so flaming." (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

Although the representation of masculine gay men certainly challenges the social misconception of an association between male homosexuality and effeminacy, some participants' despise of unconventional gender performance ends up valorizing heteronormativity and hegemonic gender ideologies. Therefore, radical queer activists criticizes assimilationist politics for seeking social acceptance of some homosexuals by

making them seem normal, while this normality is denounced as an emulation of heteromasculine behavior (Clark 2005). The debate over normalization and assimilation illuminates the struggle over power within minority groups, dividing GLBT people who seek the acceptance and privileges that hegemonic masculinity/femininity and heteronormativity offers.

**Politicized Gay Consumer Culture and Economic Citizenship**

When reading gay-explicit commercials, participants were highly aware of the textual codes of upward mobility and the ad characters' middle-class economic status, which was the social position that most of them belonged to or aspired to. For example, the theme of being financially stable and secure was constantly noted when discussing the John Hancock commercial:

> As there are more people in the community who have reached the point that they are more financially secure and want to raise children and John Hancock is showing a lesbian family…they realized that's the demographic. I like that. It seems like they knew exactly who their target is. (Fiona, Asian American, lesbian, 26)

While many participants found the purchase of a new dining table as symbolizing the characters' committed relationship in the IKEA commercial "funny and yet adorable" (Michelle, Caucasian, lesbian, 24), they also specified the financially comfortable status of the presented gay male couple:

> They are not like some good-looking, unrealistic models. They are more matured, middle-age, financially stable, just like regular people. (Daniel, Mexican American, gay, 37)

However, the "regular people" Daniel referred to pertained only to the middle-class and excluded the lower social class and working class population. Middle-class beliefs were found to govern many participants' discussions of out-of-closet advertising texts. In particular, the middle-class notions of economic citizenship based on participation in the mass consumer economy were highly stressed. Devoid of historical and cultural context, many participants tended to focus mainly on their role as economic citizens, such as "we have same boring jobs as straight people do," "we pay or taxes," or "we shop there too," rather than moving to a more critical perspective questioning cultural and social structures that created the oppression in the first place. When describing his experience involving the local GLBT communities, Dana specified the importance of financial independence for gay communities:

> […] having the supportive environment here. We have the gay film festival, we have gay pride day, we have role models from the gay community. Here we are, an financially independent community. We are successful. I don't need to worry about the hillbillies knocking on our door (Dana, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

Jessie also argued that improved economic status and the ability to participant in the mass market equate a mainstream membership.

> We got money. We contributed to the corporation. We contributed to big business. We got families. We are part of the mainstream now. (Jessie, Asian American, lesbian, 53)

Justin further compared the development of the gay market to the African American and Latino markets and argued that niche marketing is a natural and necessary

process that social minorities have to go through to achieve social inclusion into the mainstream:

> When people start advertising to black community, it's recognizing them as a community, recognizing them as someone that worth something as a consumer. Like the marketing of African American hair product, these were there before blacks had all the rights….Back in the 50s, they were marketing African American hair products and recognizing this group as valid consumers and that can lead them to being recognized as citizens more. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

Justin suggested that economic power actualized through consumption is a viable route for social acceptance, rather than questioning why social minorities are oppressed in the first place. More importantly, he completely ignored that marketing hair-straightening products to African American consumers imposed a racist beauty standard that white people's straight hair was the norm and ideal for African Americans to emulate. Justin's uncritical view of the politics-laden marketplace and consumer culture was shared by some other participants who implied that consumer rights were important to, if not equal to, civil rights.

**Consumption-oriented Citizenship**

Jacob (2004) points out that as the American economy and society became increasingly organized around a mass consumer market, the means to consume became important not only for material and survival needs but more broadly as a certificate of citizenship. Consumption has replaced production as the foundation of American civic identity, as a Mexican American participant observed,

> I think the only way that people can say that I am an American is achieving the status of living. In the US, that is to have a nice car, to have a nice house, the

> absolute consumption. Buying goods is a way to achieve that lifestyle. (George, Mexican American, gay, 42)

The construction of a consumption-oriented citizenship can also be demonstrated through Max's arguments concerning the attainment of financial stability as an essential goal for all American citizens when discussing the John Hancock commercial:

> I think it's very positive that they are putting this out there. The whole concept of the emotional response to life insurance reflects their financial stability. You know, it reflects America. The long term financial plan. There is nothing more American than financial plans!...we are participating in the economy. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

When commenting on the significance of gay marketing and being recognized as a legitimate consumer, Max further made a direct connection between consumer rights and civil rights:

> Consumer rights and citizenship, civil rights are intricately connected in the United States, and I think it's an understatement. Our identity as consumer is almost entirely the same identity as citizenship. And when we express our identity as a consumer…that reinforces and strengthens our identity as a citizen. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

By claiming economic independence as a defining element of American citizenship, some were empowered by the new-gained status as dream consumers and appeared to wield their economic power to oppose heterosexist domination. Tyson argued that gay men's affluence redefined the traditional economic paradigm that focused on the heterosexual nuclear family:

> Growing up in a very traditional family, you know part of the definition of family is financial independence, financial stability….You work, and you have your wife, your kids, and you are financially stable and you support your wife and your kids.

> And the inclination is that because you are outside of that norm, you are not aught to be successful. Whereas, the reality is gay men are more likely to be wealthier than many people because they don't have wife or kids to spend their money on. When I do my research, I found about that all the time. (Tyson, African American, gay, 47)

Tyson also used Richard Florida's (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class* as an example of the economic importance of gay communities. Florida proposed a theory studying the relationship between the "creative class" and regional economic development. According to Florida, the "creative class" includes people working in science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music and entertainment, and this group is deemed to be the driving force transforming work, leisure, community, and the everyday life of cities. In his findings, he reported that places with a large gay population tend to have more robust economic growth. The explanation for this relationship lies in GLBT people's tendency to live in places that encourage tolerance and self-expression, a living environment attractive to the creative class, straight or gay. His theory has been widely discussed and influential in various trade publications. Economic theories like Florida's and numerous marketing research that often report gay population's inflated disposable income unexceptionally celebrate and enhance GLBT consumers' identity as economic citizens.

Additionally, discourse on gay marketing has raised GLBT consumers' awareness of their economic power and brought them an unexceptional sense of validation. As Bronski (1984) points out,

> Since there are close associations in the public's mind between personal freedom and economic independence, images of upwardly mobile, financially comfortable gay men are comforting to gay men who have made it as well as to gay men who want to make it, hoping for some relief from daily homophobia. (p. 179)

Indeed, findings from this research indicates that gay marketing and the gay dream consumer stereotype have probably become the most accessible means of self-empowerment, individual identity formation, and group affiliation for many gay, lesbian, and bisexual consumers. Sharon explained the pleasure of being targeted and being included in the mass market:

> Gay advertising is a positive thing because I like being targeted. I like being seen as part of the consumer society, part of the people who want to buy the product. I think, more so because of being GLBT, you constantly feel being rejected. So when you are being targeted or "Hey, come buy my product," maybe they just want your money, but they recognize you are important consumers. (Sharon, Caucasian, bisexual, 26)

The gratitude for being targeted by mainstream marketers' as legitimate consumers was also voiced by Helena when discussing the John Hancock commercial:

> I think the ad says that "Green is green and we are willing to help everybody equally. We are not going to say, we don't want you because you are gay, or we want you because you are straight. We will give you both quality service." It should be that way. (Helena, Caucasian, lesbian, 44)

Similarly, Alice considered the development of gay advertising as a positive change:

> People see a gay spending trend, they are like, "Hey, I want to do something about it." for me, understanding business, when a company is willing to take their brand and associate it with my community, even it's just a small step of event sponsorship, it's to me very important….Companies spend a lot of time and money to generate an image. So when a company is willing to put it out there, I just think it's great. I am drawn to that. I think it's all good. (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

Justin further argued that gay marketing validated and legitimated not only the existence but also the "worth" of gay communities:

> The community is there. As long as marketers are going to do something about it, it's like giving validation to the community. If they are marketing to them, they're worth something. They consider it's a cohesive market that is worth marketing to. It is something based on the dollars, but the fact is that there is a market that can be marketed to. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

It has been noted that lesbians and gays often interpret advertising geared towards them as a sign of validation and legitimation (Penaloza 1996; Chasin 2000). Yet, participants' gratefulness for marketers' willingness to solicit their patronage was disturbingly sad, especially when they acknowledged that gay marketing can be based on purely profit-driven strategies with the potential of exploitation. The grateful mentality also suggests the thinking that if they have not yet gained full and equal rights as American citizens, at the least they have achieved the status as desirable consumers. Gross (2001) further argues that being included in advertising is the ultimate recognition that American society can bestow because advertising "does not claim to depict life as it is but as it should be—life and lives worth emulating" (p. 233). For many GLBT consumers, being included in mainstream advertising thus constitutes a milestone on the road to full citizenship in the capitalistic American society.

The increasing sponsorship of gay events by major companies also validated gay consumers' belief in the socio-political implications of their gay dollars. Marina argued that development of a gay market brought more resources to the community which can be considered as a major gain of the movement:

> I am just thrilled that electronic media, marketing media, TV, all of them, are embracing that [gay] market. Believe me, it's out there. It's amazing. We had several fundraisers here in town [that] easily raised six figures. That's a lot of money! Of course, it's usually all gay men but you still have that gay initiative that brings it all together. I think that's one of the biggest glories of the whole movement that we now have more resources. (Marina, African American, lesbian, 44)

*Consumerist Liberalism*

Underlying participants' emphasis on their economic power and consumption as tools towards social change was a consumer-oriented liberalist belief. In her book *Freedom From Want,* Kathleen G. Donohue (2003) theorizes that classical liberalism in the United States has transformed into a modern American version which emphasizes consumers over producers and consumption over production. She thus argues that American liberalism has become a consumer-focused development. Chasin (2000) also argues that "consumer sovereignty rests first of all on the liberal-economic principle that individuals have free choice in the marketplace" (p. 149). This consumption-oriented liberalism can be illuminated by participants' beliefs in market democracy. Many participants constantly argued that in a profit-driven, free-market capitalist system of the United States, wielding their economic power through consumption would effectively lead to market reform and social changes. For instance, Justin emphasized the importance of economic citizenship in influencing mainstream society:

> If we play a dominant role in our economy, it will change, [it will create] a more subtler profound impact on our identity and on our society. And recently, gay men specifically, become a visible part of the economy. So it's like, "If we want to keep our economy, we have to be more inclusive." And that's what they have to do. (Justin, Caucasian, gay, 19)

Alice further connected market democracy to the influential role of economic power in social change:

> When you are in a democratic capitalistic society, it's money that moves things. America is ruled by business and business is only taken notice when there has been enough revenue….Even politics, you need to raise money for your campaigns. (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

Yet, Alice's model of market democracy implies that market citizenship was predominantly enfranchised based on one's qualification to participant in a mass market. Those who are not financially eligible remain disenfranchised and are oppressed through the violence of symbolic annihilation, just like the current upper-middle class construction of gay marketing in which working-class queers as well as most lesbians and queer people of color are rendered virtually invisible.

Accordingly, an African American lesbian participant criticized the selective gay visibility when discussing John Hancock's support of gay adoption rights in its advertising:

> It's [gay adoption] still out of touch. It's only targeting to a very small group. You know, when I was growing up, black people could not get a loan for a house, but they could get a loan for a car. So it's still capitalism directing your wealth, directing whatever…. I think in the gay culture, definitely the men are represented more than lesbians, and white men were represented more than African American and Asian Americans…The more money you have, the more visibility. (Shirley, African American, lesbian, 43)

Extending their beliefs in market liberalism, many also hold a liberalist stance for many aspects of individual freedom. Many participants' criticism of homophobia and objection to the recent ban on gay marriage was centered on an individual level, such as "I don't

care who they sleep with. Why would they care about who I sleep with?" (Tyson, African American, gay, 47). The individualist mentality can also be illustrated by Billy's criticism of the anti-gay marriage law as violating his individual freedom:

> It's my private life. It's none of their business. I don't care how straight people live their lives and they shouldn't intervene my rights, my decisions, my life." (Billy, Jewish, gay, 44)

Criticisms constructed on the individual level and beliefs of consumption-oriented liberalism fail to go beyond the confines of personal identity and experiences and hinder the development of a broader political vision beyond gay identity politics.

*Gay Activists in Shopping Malls*

The idea of achieving full civil rights through consumption rights has been promoted not only in gay advertising discourse but also within GLBT communities. Recently, explicit efforts to evaluate companies' policies and employment practices in order to inform and educate GLBT consumers have become available. Major gay publications such as *Out* and *Advocate* frequently featured updated gay marketing news. For example, in his book *Untold Millions: Secret Truths about Marketing to Gay and Lesbian Consumers* (1995), Grant Lukenbill, a trade industry news reporter and business author, compiled a yearly list that rates some of the largest companies in the United States on what he calls the gay-lesbian values index. It ranks private companies on a ten-point scale that takes into account whether the company includes sexual orientation in its nondiscrimination policy, has same-sex domestic-partner benefits, and does not support groups that oppose passage of rights protections for gays and lesbians, among other

things. Lukenbill's Gay and Lesbian Values Index was later adopted by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation as its Corporate Equality Index that rates major U.S. corporations on their records toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employees, consumers, and investors.

The merger of discourses on consumer rights and gay rights activism is noteworthy. Grant Lukenbill's second book titled *Smart Spending: the Gay and Lesbian Guide to Socially Responsible Shopping and Investing* (1999) persuades GLBT consumers to exercise activism in their everyday consumption practices. The Equality Project, "a coalition of consumer, employees, and investors" was formed for changing GLBT consumer's buying habits to reward gay-friendly companies. The new slogan of the local Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce was "Family owned, family operated", as the chamber argued that "Supporting gay-owned and gay supportive businesses in turn support our community." Additionally, the Human Rights Campaign published the free *Buying for Equality Guide* based on its annual Corporate Equality Index Report to provide GLBT consumers with the information needed "to support products from companies that support equality" (HRC website). In the buyer's guide, HRC argues that making the choice to support fair-minded businesses can help affect real change across the country and thus GLBT consumers should make every effort to support the companies that make the best scores. In its buyer's guide, the foundation's national sponsors are clearly marked with HRC's logo and it is specified that "support of these companies is directly tied to the Human Rights Campaign's success in ensuring equality

for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans" (*Buying for Equality Guide* p. 2), further strengthening the tie between gay rights movement and corporate America.

Major gay publications also endeavor to inform GLBT consumers of the political climate in the marketplace. For example, Ford's decision to cut back advertising in gay publications due to the boycott threats by the antigay American Family Association had been extensively and continuously covered in the *Advocate*. Numerous reports, commentaries, and a reader's poll regarding the question, "Has Ford permanently hurts its images with LGBT consumers?" have been devoted to educate GLBT consumers how the marketplace is divided into allies and enemies.

These efforts have generated widespread consciousness among GLBT consumers regarding the political dimension of their consumption practices and might have greatly influenced my participants' arguments for consumerist activism. Many of them subscribed to HRC's email newsletters or volunteered with them. Some participants also reported that they consulted HRC's Corporate Equality Index before they applied for jobs and sometimes before they made a major purchase:

> I got a lot of HRC emails and they talked about those corporations are being real bastards, and these corporations are being really progressive…And though I didn't put it at the forefront of my decision making, I did file it away in the back of my mind…. I just bought a car. It's a Volkswagen Jetta. And I checked with HRC's website. (Troy, Caucasian, gay, 30)

Troy also noted the politically-informed consumer choices within his social circle:

> You can also get the information from…HRC has a report every year on companies that are good. And some friends who are more politically active or politically conscious, than others, they often research before they shop, to pick the more gay friendly companies. ((Troy, Caucasian, gay, 30)

Consequently, exercising consumer rights were considered as an important way of achieving social recognition, as Fiona argued:

> More rights that we have, including consumer rights, the more recognition we are able to receive. (Fiona, Asian American, lesbian, 26)

Alice, who believed in the economic force to move society towards recognizing gay communities, took a step further by advocating "socially responsible" purchase decisions among her peers:

> I read a lot of gay news…When I read about, here is the top 50 companies for gay people to work for, I am very curious what these companies are, and what they are trying to do. And advertising is a large part of it because there are a lot of gay people that are not socially responsible. They don't really think about or research…where they spend their money. I have friends, they go out, they party, they don't really care. When we are hanging out and reading magazines…they are surprised that this company is willing to put an ad [in gay magazines]…and it's a national brand…But when I tell my friends "Did you know Wells Fargo has gay employee groups?" they are like "Oh, I don't know that." So I have always encouraged my friends to vote with their money. (Alice, Asian American, lesbian, 34)

Alice thus explicated that the gay dollar used for supporting gay-friendly business constituted gay votes in the politicized marketplace; consumer market was equated to a ballot box where consumer rights were as influential as civil rights. The consumerist activism is actually a pro-capitalism strategy, as it accepts and takes advantage of certain central premises of capitalism. The capitalist characteristics of the free-market, such as that everyone can get what they want, and of business competition that creates the opportunity to pit one business against another provide the platform for consumers to "vote with their money."

However, consumerist activism is, again, a middle-class conception. As Troy jokingly described some gay people's lack of political involvement as "I know some people who think activism means writing a check [donation to gay rights organizations]," the capacity and freedom to support brand allies and boycott brand enemies (Kates 2000) is available only to those who are financially comfortable. Furthermore, Sender (2004) suggests that upper-middle class privilege (I would add white and male advantages) allows some GLBT people to be more actively engaged in political activism. GLBT people of a prosperous social position may be more enraged by anti-gay discrimination as being queer is the sole barrier to the class privilege that they could otherwise claim. In this perspective, GLBT individuals' consumerist activism not only reflected the socio-political dimension of consumption, but also implicated the existing social structure of gender, race, and class hierarchies where consumerist activism is located.

**Defining Queerness: The GLBT perspective**

When interpreting gay-explicit commercials, many participants' meaning-makings were constructed in a comparative framework, contrasting advertising representations to their self-perception and to the GLBT image constructed within the communities and in the mainstream society. This section discusses how gayness, bisexuality, and transgenderism are constructed, defined, negotiated in relation to participants' self identities and their readings of gay advertising.

**The Trendy Gay Man and His (Superior) Gay Tastes**

The dominant gay habitus created an ideal gay male image in the gay male community that was unsurprisingly similar to the gay dream consumer stereotype in gay advertising. The mainstream gay male image of a physically fit, well-groomed, and stylishly attired man imposed a racially and class-coded beauty standard that was found to be oppressive to many gay male participants. Troy noted that he was disappointed to find out that he was unsuitable to the mainstream gay image when he was expecting to finally find a community to fit in. Tyson also criticized the appearance-driven gay male culture:

> […] in the straight community, they don't ostracize unattractive people, while there are plenty of gay men who don't even talk to unattractive people. It's an unpleasant experience….If you are not gorgeous, they just look through you like you don't exist. A lot of gay men cruise with their eyes. (Tyson, African American, gay, 47)

Consequently, the average looking characters in the IKEA commercial presented a pleasant change to Billy:

> You know what I like the most was that they look like just normal ordinary guys. They weren't like movie stars. They didn't look like they worked out in the gym all the time, super gorgeous, because I wouldn't respond to that, to some gorgeous muscular, muscle-bound guy…in gay magazines, it's always gorgeous gorgeous muscle bound guys. That's how straight advertising works too. They use beautiful straight women to sell cars and things. (Billy, Jewish, gay, 44)

Max likewise expressed concerns over the growing pressure on gay men to attain physical perfection that is depressing and harmful for many gay men's body images and self-identities:

> […] very fit, very finely groomed, very highly dressed, top of the fashion, Cosmo fashion…dominates the norm….One thing you see is people who don't have that physique end up having a sense of depression…It's like I can't achieve…what a gay man should look like and be like, then how am I suppose to exist as a gay man? (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

This ideal gay physique connotes a class-stratified beauty standard as it often involves expensive gym membership, proper diet, and careful grooming that is dictated by the dominant gay habitus. However, sophisticated gay tastes which are also connected to the regime of dominant gay habitus were uncritically acclaimed by most participants. As many participants witnessed that gay male characters of fashion designers, hair dressers, and interior designers have popped up relentlessly in advertising and in mass media, they tended to consider the stylish gay male stereotype as reflecting gay men's inherent superior fashion sense and tastes, as Will explained the deep connection between gay men and fashion:

> A lot of fashion trends start with gay men and the black. In big cities where you can find a lot of gay men, like New York, Chicago, L.A., you will find a lot of trendiness. (Will, Caucasian, bisexual, 29)

Flattered by the confident, easy-going, savvy, trendy gay male images encapsulated by the popularity of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, many participants embraced them as gratifying representations, although the class-coded gay tastes and conspicuous gay consumption can be as unattainable as the ideal physique for many gay men. Andy argued that the trendy image can be affirmative in comparison to stigmatized stereotypes, especially for gay men who just came out, even though the characters were often presented in media for servicing the (heterosexual) mainstream:

> When people come out, in general, they go through what I called "the type search." Some of them try to look up to the stereotypes or misconceptions, trying to fit themselves into the ideal…the trendy image might be affirming the GLBT images…people now would know, if they want to have a haircut, they can trust a gay guy or lesbians are good at mechanics. So it's showing gay people in a positive light. (Andy, Asian American, gay, 20)

Gay rights activist John Aravosis also argues that the gay male stereotypes are no longer harmful because "We are being presented as the person you wish you could have as your neighbor" (as cited in Clarkson 2005, p.245). Media scholar Kylo-Patrick Hart (2004) takes a step further arguing that the fashion-savvy image promoted in shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*" (p. 242) constitutes a media revolution by depicting gay men as *superior* to straight men in terms of taste literacy:

> This groundbreaking television series consistently offers the most positive representations of gay men on U.S. television that has ever been available to them. It does so not only by defying stereotypical media conventions but also by inverting the power dynamic between gay men and straights and encoding its experts as a band of (gay) superheroes that heterosexuals who want to live truly happy lives simply can not live without. (p. 241)

Educated by marketing research on gay men's high disposable income, various participants deemed the affluent guppie images in mass media as reflecting the superior gay male lifestyles:

> Quite more often, gay couples are much more successful, much wealthier. If you read gay magazines, you would know this… And I think that's where the gay representation has to go…something embracing the reality as the picture, something like *Will and Grace*, and *Queer Eye*…It pushes into the larger societal norm, penetrating into straight people's living room and it opens door. There is one show of *Will and Grace* that I think is hilarious. They [Will and Jack] go to some really small town, the middle of no where. I think it's probably Will's high school reunion…And the people are just thrilled to death. They are like, "The

> gays are coming!" Because in their mind, gays are equal to wealthy city people with a large disposable income, and this is what marketers say…the characters in the town saw that's the demographic they have to target to maintain their stability as business owners. (Billy, Jewish, gay, 44)

Noticeably, Billy's embrace of the flattering guppie image was accompanied by excitement and gratification. Many participants uncritically took the reportedly (inflated) high disposable income of gay men as a verified truth, which brought not only comfort and affirmation to some male participants, but also, to some extent, a sense of superiority as gay men's newly approved affluence and sophisticated taste literacy raised their status to valued consumer culture elites. In addition to gay men's reputation with fashion, Billy noted that gay men appeared to enjoy a better quality of life than their heterosexual counterparts:

> It's not just that gay men are into fashion. I have read so many accounts, like going back to a high school reunion, only the gay men that are still in shape, look good and take good care of themselves while straight men and straight women had gotten really fat…gay men do take better care of themselves, at least physically and appearance-wise. (Billy, Jewish, gay, 44)

In her study on the construction of gayness by gay marketing professionals, Sender (2004) observes that gay entrepreneurs often preserve gay difference by highlighting their exclusive insider knowledge in order to assist (heterosexual) mainstream marketers' in reaching the unique gay market. In a related vein, the cultural phenomenon of queer-chic centered on fashionable gay tastes that many gay men seem to inherently possess indirectly capitalizes on gay difference. This difference can be best exemplified through the predictable plot in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* in which straight men are

unrefined, ungroomed, and uncultured, in dramatic contrast to the Fab Five's sophisticated, high-end, and aesthetic tastes. Gay difference based on superior gay tastes and lifestyles is reconfigured into valuable assets and objectified into gay fashion gurus' professional expertise.

The present significance attached to gay men's trendiness appears to be more than a cultural fad, like that of the lesbian-chic phenomenon in the 1990s. In the gay marketing discourse, the profile of gay consumers as having enormous disposable income, high-end tastes, and conspicuous consumption tendencies is apparently different from "everybody else," and contradicts participants' assimilationist arguments. In fact, the newly discovered economic power of upper-middle class gay men functions not only as a lure to attract mainstream marketer's advertising dollars, but also as a license to assimilate the now valuable consumers.

A survey published by the National Institute of Justice, the research arm of the Justice Department in 1987 reported that gay people are the most frequent victims of hate crime (Grigg 1992). Therefore, for gay men and lesbians to be elevated from such a marginalized and stigmatized position to mainstream status, being average is not enough. Gay people need to do better than average in order to be accepted and valued, evidenced through the reportedly higher-than-average disposable income and superior tastes. In a way, gay people have to pay a higher price for admission into the mainstream. Therefore, gay marketing and advertising works through the paradox of capitalizing on gay difference and simultaneously assimilating the selected gays.

Popular culture's commodification of queerness has raised concerns over heterosexual society's utilization and colonization of queer identities (Bronski 1984; Clark 2000). In the recent cultural fascination of queer-chic, gay difference is glorified but valuable only when it is used to better heterosexual mainstream's quality of life. Therefore, heterosexual hegemony remains intact. As Bronski argues (1984), "when gay sensibility is used as a sales pitch, the strategy is that gay images imply distinction and non-conformity, granting straight consumers a longed-for place outside the humdrum mainstream." Mainstream culture has long been enjoying the otherness of the marginalized, as bell hooks (1993) argues convincingly that the commodification of otherness has been successful as the otherness serves as a new spice stimulating the dominant group's appetite. In his analysis of the Benetton ad campaigns of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Giroux (1994) severely criticizes advertising's commercialization of otherness to boost consumption:

> Concerted and often pernicious efforts to rearticulate the relationship among difference, human agency, and community…advertising increasingly succeeds in its promotional mission: to disguise the political nature of everyday life and appropriate the vulnerable new terrain of insurgent differences in the interests of a crass consumerism. (p. 6)

**Femme Lesbian and Her Lipstick**

Within the current media landscape of gay visibility, lesbians remain disproportionately underrepresented. Some marketing reports argue that the invisibility of lesbians in media and elsewhere is the main barrier for mainstream marketers. In contrast to the prominence of the image of trendy gay male consumers, lesbians have just recently

been courted as a viable consumer market. Therefore, explicit lesbian-themed commercials remain rare and lesbian-targeted commercials are even scarcer.

Additionally, Ann Ciasullo (2001) indicates that most mainstream representations of lesbianism are heterosexualized through the skewed media portrayal of femme lesbians who "are looking just like conventionally attractive straight women" (p. 578). She also suggests that she is de-homosexualized, as the representation of sexual desire between two women is often suppressed. Yet, the recent capitalization of lesbian erotica in mainstream media signifies a dramatic change; the femme lesbian image in mainstream media has been increasingly sexualized in a manner that is no different from media's objectifying of heterosexual women. Richart (1999) theorizes that the lipstick lesbian image and tantalizing lesbian erotica in fashion advertising mirrors heterosexual mainstream's fantasization of pseudo-lesbians in heterosexual pornography.

This criticism was also raised by many participants. When reading the Clothestime commercial, some participants found the dramatization of female same-sex desire as over-the-top, sensationalized, unrealistic and thus unlikely to be lesbian-targeted:

> Stuff like that…tried to make it…sexual, fantasy for guys. The only lesbians on there are the super femme, the really gorgeous ones that straight guys can fantasize about. (Audra, Mexican American, lesbian, 22)

The overly sexualization in the commercial was found to be similar to the media convention of using lesbian homoerotica as a theatrical spectacle. Audra also discussed the ad in relation to "incidental lesbianism" in popular culture that devalues lesbian sexuality for sexual drama:

> On the *OC* where they had an episode where Mischa Barton was like lesbian for a day. And it's just sort of sexy drama that the male viewers would watch two girls make out…that really upsets me…It was just a kiss…this is ridiculous. I was upset. (Audra, Mexican American, lesbian, 22)

Sharon pointed out that the public approval of incidental lesbianism was based on the understanding that the presented female same-sex sensuality, no matter how explicit or hard-core, was artificial and unthreatening since audiences have already been assured of the actresses' "real" heterosexuality:

> You often see sexual tension between straight characters, or perceived lesbians characters played by straight persons, something like Buffy the Vampire. I know there is this lesbian character made out with her straight friend on TV. It's always the sexual tension, the kiss, the make out…like Madonna and Britney spears kissed. I don't really mind them making out, but it's not a lesbian kiss, it's not lesbians kissing. (Sharon, Caucasian, bisexual, 26)

As a femme-identified lesbian who was more likely to identify with the femme image, Bette nonetheless remained skeptical of the occasional representation of female same-sex relationships in mainstream media:

> A part of me is always wondering "Do they put it there for the gratifications of men?" I am thinking about Gwyneth Paltrow in *The Royal Tenenbaums*. There is a five-second sex scene with some other women, and I was thinking it was there because half of the America [the heterosexual male] has been waiting to see Gwyneth Paltrow to make out with another woman. (Bette, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

Participants' examples illustrated how selected and sanitized otherness, such as the heterosexualized lesbian erotica, has been utilized by mainstream culture as an incidental spectacle and a fad. Moreover, Audra argued that the over-representation of femme

lesbians perpetuated traditional gender roles and pushed the gender-nonconformists back into the closet:

> Obviously, not every lesbian looks femme. It makes things more difficult for people who aren't like that. It's still not okay to be different from what gender roles the media has presented for you. Even though they are bringing lesbians into the scene more but still presenting this image that you have to be super femme, dressed up and sexy. (Audra, Mexican American, lesbian, 22)

Due to the perceived superficial pseudo-lesbian depictions in the Clothestime commercial, some participants related the ad to the "lesbian-chic" trend or the hype of "it's cool to be a lesbian", which many of them found to be problematic and trivializing lesbian identity. Dana noted that the seemingly open attitudes towards exploring female same-sex desire, especially among the younger generation was only skin deep and offensive:

> Like these high school kids, "yeah, I am gay," blah blah blah. It bothers me because "Are you doing it just because it's the thing to do? Or is it something you are really considering or you have feelings about?"…a group of young girls thinking that's the thing to do. Straight people just take the culture and try to use it to be cool or whatever. It's kind a self-fulfilling thing and it irritates me…It puts a bad image "Oh well, you are not really lesbian, you are just doing it." …It's cheapening it in a sense. That's part of my life. That's who I am…It reinforces that it is just a phase or a state of mind for the time being. (Dana, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

Through their analysis of the public fascination with the display of same-sex sensuality between feminine-looking women, many participants frequently noted that (feminine women's) female sexuality was safer for mass media and marketers' to experiment with, as Anna argued that 'Females are just so much more unthreatening, in anyway, or not taken seriously."

Yet, implicit in society's careless attitude towards feminine-looking women's exploration with same-sex desire is the tenacious stigma of homosexuality as a symptom of gender nonconformity or gender identity disorder, as masculine women's same-sex desire has rarely been treated as temporal, situational, or lightheartedly. As lesbianism is so deeply intertwined with gender perversion in public imagination, and relatively, as heterosexuality is often constructed through traditional gender role-playing, a feminine-looking woman can not possibly to be a true lesbian. This relatively careless and seemingly accepting attitude towards lesbianism in the mainstream society has created a dilemma between social tolerance and social legitimation, as Carmen explained,

> Sometimes people think it's just some immature girl crushes. Girls are allowed to have crushes on other girls. Like some of my friends in high school…"Oh, she has a crush on her!" But no one thinks of her as lesbian, no one takes it seriously. It's like "She will find the right guy. She will grow out of it…In one sense, you can show affections in public. People don't think much of it. But also it's not as much as when two guys together…two girls together, maybe it's not seen as seriously I don't think it's necessarily more acceptable. I think they think about it less, pay less attention. (Carmen, Caucasian, lesbian, 18)

Bette explicated how her lesbian relationship with her equally feminine-looking partner was often belittled or ignored by straight men who objectify femme lesbians:

> Both of us [she and her partner] are very femme and every once for a while, when we meet some curious straight men…when they look at us, they don't think we are lesbians. They think we are embodiment of soft porn. And they were like, "That's totally hot" and they immediately hit on us. I definitely had had that happen, not like it happened all the time but it happened enough time to make this thing… sad….in front of these men I get the feeling that the two of us are doing this for their gratification. (Bette, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

However, in contrast to the disproportionately over-represented femme lesbian in popular cultural landscapes, the butch lesbian remains anonymous and synonymous with lesbianism in public consciousness, which can be illustrated by the confusion that femme-identified participants like Carmen and Bette encountered during the lesbian identity formation process:

> Even I was open about my sexuality, but there was part of me that wasn't hesitant to come out and say this is part of me because…I feel I don't really fit in the [butch] stereotype…"Is it really true that I am gay?" (Bette, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

> When I was coming out to myself…I totally don't fit the stereotype—butch, short hair, riding motorcycle—that s what I associated with lesbianism. That's what I had in my mind. But when you look at Ellen, she is just normal. She wasn't really butch. She doesn't fit that stereotype. And that was a comfort to me to know there is such an icon and she doesn't fit the stereotype and neither do I. (Carmen, Caucasian, lesbian, 18)

However, as Ciasullo so convincingly argues about the prominence of the butch lesbian image in cultural imagination, it might have rendered femme lesbians culturally invisible even within the lesbian community, which can be illustrated by the frustration of a femme lesbian participant:

> I have discussed this topic with my friends many times, but there's never an easy answer. I'm femme but feel invisible in the community. I'm not willing to tattoo a rainbow on my forehead…I sometimes wish we can employ the San Francisco hankie code or something like it [laughter]. (Audra, Mexican American, lesbian, 22)

As some participants argued that the media depictions of sexualized lipstick lesbians who can "totally pass as a feminine straight woman" (Helena, Caucasian, lesbian, 44) are most likely designed for heterosexual male gaze, this skepticism might have created a general

distrust towards femme lesbians within the GLBT communities. In a way, femme lesbians who embody conventional femininity can be questioned for their lesbian identity and constantly regarded as bisexual women:

> […]…lipstick lesbians…like Ellen's girlfriend, Portia de Rossi, even lesbians can't really, necessarily, accept that. Really really beautiful lesbians, even other lesbians don't really trust they are really gay….It just came out of my girlfriend's mouth the other day…we were looking at Ellen DeGeneres and her girlfriend [in a lesbian magazine] and she said, "She is so pretty. I had the hardest time believing, for the longest time, that she is really a lesbian, not just bisexual." (Shirley, African American, lesbian, 43)

Therefore, representation of lesbian becomes a contested cultural terrain where binary ideological systems of stereotype/iconography, femininity/masculinity, and heterosexuality/homosexuality dynamically construct lesbianism.

**Bisexuality: Invisible in the No Man's Land**

Garber (1995) questions in her book *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, "Is bisexuality a 'third kind' of sexual identity, between or beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality? Or is it something that puts in questions the very concept of sexual identity in the first place?" (p. 15). These questions encapsulate the nebulous role of bisexuality in the cultural discourse of sexuality. Conceptualized as having one foot straying outside of the heterosexist paradigm, bisexuality has been penalized along with homosexuality as sexual outlaws. The rigidly enforced homo/heterosexuality dichotomy marginalizes bisexuality, rendering it invisible in mainstream discourse and even in the allegedly all-inclusive GLBT communities, as illustrated by Will's struggle with his bisexual identity:

> I had a very difficult time coming out to myself. It took me an entire year to accept that I am bisexual…I didn't feel like fitting in the gay/straight dichotomy and I wasn't aware of the possibility of bisexuality… while the title of GLBT is widely used, in reality, only the G and L voices are heard. The rest is pretty much invisible. Also, to a less obvious degree, and in a more subtle manner, but I felt that biphobia still exist in the community. People won't say that in my face, but the attitude is more like, leave your ex-heterosexual history at home, or bring only your gay-half to our meetings. (Will, Caucasian, bisexual, 29)

Even as an outspoken gay rights activist, the symbolic annihilation resulting from invisibility has left no ground for Sharon to fight back:

> I've never seen bisexual issues. Like, I identify as bisexual, but I don't even know how to talk about it. There is not even anything that I can say, "That's where I see it," and "That's what I think right or wrong." There is not even, anything available. (Sharon, Caucasian, bisexual, 26)

While the modern gay and lesbian movement has successfully queered the heterosexist human history by reclaiming and renaming of homosexuals from the past, it has also effectively absorbed bisexuality into the overarching "gay and lesbian" discourse. As Garber (1995) theorizes that bringing out the homosexuals of the past meant labeling, it has also meant bracketing bisexuality. In reality, "Gay (or bisexual)" and "lesbian (or bisexual)" became just gay and lesbian. Bisexuals are subsumed under gay or lesbian and are written out.

In addition to invisibility, the trivialization and condemnation aspects of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman 1978) further obscure and stigmatize bisexuality. Fiona succinctly summarized the three prevalent stigmas associated with bisexuality—promiscuity, bewilderment, and fence-sitting:

> I think people a lot of times view bisexuals, like, being at a buffet or being confused or being on the fence, not part of the straight, or in the grey area, confused, can't pick. Or they have way more sexual energy than the straight person. (Fiona, Asian American, lesbian, 26)

These stigmas and the resulting distrust of bisexual people from both straight and gay people has caused many to shun away from the bisexual label, as Bette explained,

> People don't want to call themselves bisexual. Like, I call myself a lesbian…I have been in a lesbian relationship for over 6 years and I don't expect to get out of that relationship. But have I been attracted to men? Yes. Would I be attracted to men again? Probably. Even so, it's easier for me call me a lesbian to reflect the reality of my life. And it's less confusing to people….I think most people, when they think about sexuality, they don't look at bisexual as a valid category. They tend to think of people who pertain to both worlds as sort of confused. (Bette, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

Ochs (1996) also observes that many bisexual people choose to remain silent, fearing stigmatization and exclusion. Yet, the continuous erasure of the existence of bisexuality perpetuates the perceived exclusiveness of the homo/heterosexual categories that in turn aggrandizes homophobia:

> Perpetuating the silence of bisexuals allows the dominant culture to exaggerate the differences between heterosexual and homosexual, and to ignore the fact that human sexuality exists on a continuum. It is much less threatening to the dominant heterosexual culture to perpetuate the illusion that homosexuals are "that category, way over there," very different from heterosexuals. If "they" are so different, heterosexuals do not have to confront the possibility of acknowledging same-sex attractions within themselves, and the attendant anxiety of possibly "becoming like them." There is considerable anxiety in being forced to acknowledge that the "other" is not quite as different from you as you might like. (p. 225)

*Female Bisexuality: Bisexual-Chic, Bi-Curious, and Fence-Sitters*

Yet, similar to the mediated lesbian-chic trend, bisexuality has been packaged as a fashionable alternative outside the monotonous societal norm in the popular cultural landscape. Titled "Partway Gay?" an article featured in the "style" section of the *Washington Post* declares that a wave of "bisexual chic" is sweeping the United States (Stepp 2004). The author argues that it has become the next hip thing for teenage girls to be bisexual, or "heteroflexible," experimenting with same-sex sexuality while upholding their default heterosexual orientation. Various participants gave examples of teenage girls' ride on the bisexual-chic wave to entice heterosexual men's fantasy, a social scene that is no different from the incidental or situational lesbianism in mass media. Hence, much discussion on "bisexual-chic" overlaps with that on "lesbian-chic":

> A girl from my complex…she was drunk and she was talking about how she would make out with girls in a bar and guys would buy them drinks for the attention factor. (Andy, Asian American, gay, 20)

> I have a friend who is out as bisexual. And at a party, her friends…they would make out together and the purpose of it is to turn on guys…I am like, "Wait a minute, what's going on?" (Brandon, Asian American, transgender man, 22)

The focus on adolescent bisexuality, illustrated by claims like "The Newest Teen Girl Fad—Bisexual Chic" (Mohler 2004) and by Andy and Brandon's observation of college social scene, points to the common belief shared by many heterosexuals, gay men, and lesbians that bisexuality is an experimenting phase among confused or rebellious youth. When reading the Jolt Cola commercial, Carmen read the female character's

fantasization of another woman as experimenting with bisexuality and argued that the suggested experimental phase dismissed the legitimacy of lesbian sexuality:

> I think it means experimenting. But I am not sure it's a good way to look at it, because by experimenting, it almost makes our sexuality not as valid. In high school, I've noticed, it's sort of the cool thing to do. Girls going around, "Hee Hee, I am bi." It's just reinforcing that stereotype as "finding something to do until a guy comes along." And I know a lot of them might kiss a girl or make out, but they will only have a relationship with a guy. (Carmen, Caucasian, lesbian, 18)

In their discussion of lipstick lesbian images, Simon and his partner Michelle also pointed out that "situational bisexuality" was based on sexual adventure or experimentation, rather than a committed identity:

> It's not realistic, even ridiculous…Now so many straight girls, or they self identify as bisexuals…are only bisexual in college, or in bars, you know, situational bisexuality. They would make out with girls at parties to turn on guys….They would make out with girls or sleep with girls. But when it comes to relationships, they wouldn't really be in a relationship with women. So, they are just being sexually adventurous. (Simon, Caucasian, transgender man, 22)

> Ya. Like know a lot of women who would say they are lesbians or bisexuals in college. But then, 98% of them would end up with men. So they would experiment a little and they would come out and say they are bisexuals but end up with a man at the end. (Michelle, Caucasian, Lesbian, 26)

Related to the bisexual-chic trend is the term "bi-curious" which was used by Shane participants to describe the female character in the Jolt Cola commercial. She then explained:

> A bi-curious is a straight person but is curious about same-sex relationships and want to experiment with lesbians or other bisexual women. But you see the posts on craigslist…they mostly ask for something like one night stand…something romantic or sexual, not long-term relationships. (Shane, Asian American, lesbian, 30)

Shane was referring to the posts on the "women seeking women" section in a local classifieds website that constitutes an information source for local GLBT communities. Her description of bi-curious also implied promiscuity, a stigma that is generally associated with bisexuality. While some participants welcomed the bisexual-chic trend or self-identified bi-curious individuals and argued that it could raise awareness of non-heterosexual possibilities, Shane found the curiosity-motivated sexual experimentation as invalidating their hard-fought sexual identity:

> Do you have to experiment to know or you just know? I just know, I don't need to experiment or being curious…[if] you are bisexual, [then you are] bisexual. There is no such a thing as bi-curious. It makes my feel my identity is not as valid. (Shane, Asian American, lesbian, 30)

Audra and Shirley also found that the seemingly free-spirited trend problematically obscured the real struggles that many gay and bisexual people have gone through:

> It's not serious at all…We are hurt by this. There are people [who] suffer because of this everyday and you are just going to have fun with the trend. No one is going to pay attention to that. But if you really are, that's when people start having a problem with it. That's very wrong to me, (Audra, Mexican American, lesbian, 22)

> That …invalidates my experience and my identity. I think most of us struggled with [sexual identity], not about "Whooo-hoooo! Let's try that!" Somebody is struggling with it, knowing that they will be stuck with it. Bi-curious equals "I don't have such and such boyfriend. I can get out of that trap and come over here…have some drama and then…I will go get married." I have seen it happened a lot. It's just a phase play for women. But I don't know anybody, who is gay or lesbian, who didn't struggle with it, it's not out of curiosity. (Shirley, African American, lesbian, 43)

Shirley's criticism indicates a deep distrust of bisexual women that was echoed by some other lesbian participants. For example, Jessie implied that bisexuality provided an easy way out for those who maintained their heterosexual privilege:

> I think straight women are becoming a lot more open to the idea of bisexuality. For some woman, it's an out. She doesn't have to commit to being a full-fledged lesbian. (Jessie, Asian American, lesbian, 53)

Andy also noted many gay men and lesbian's insecurity and anxiety when in relationships with bisexuals:

> I have friends who are self identified as gay or lesbian…when they are in a relationship with someone who self-identified as bi, they talk about their insecurity. (Andy, Asian American, gay, 20)

Underlying the prevalent distrust and insecurity is many gay men and lesbian's defensive mentality. Due to homophobia and heterosexual privilege, bisexual people who can "choose" or "have a way out" thus are not treated as comrades but are suspected to be less committed to the community. Biphobia, based on the stereotype of bisexuals as being disloyal fence-sitters, causes internal oppression which shifts focus from the socio-cultural factors that make heterosexual privilege opposable but to peers who are perceived as less oppressed.

*Impossible and Invisible Male Bisexuality*

Similar to the cultural construction of lesbian-chic, the bisexual-chic discourse reflected a one-sided trendiness; the only chic ones associated with bisexuality are women, not men. Similar to butch lesbians, bisexual men are rendered invisible. This illustrates the mainstream culture's exploitation of otherness, clearing the indigestible to

savor the more palatable, as Andy pointed out that the conjuncture of heterosexism and patriarchy has made female bisexuality more tolerated while male bisexuality is further stigmatized:

> I think there are fewer stereotypes about bisexual people, but in some cases, there is higher degree of stigmatism, and higher stigmatism towards male bisexuality than female bisexuality. In American culture, female bisexuality is more okay. They are more aware of it and they are more accepting. Our society is very heterosexual male dominated. (Andy, Asian American, gay, 20)

Yet, the perceived tolerance of female bisexuality is also based on the notion that female sexuality is inherently more fluid, while male sexuality is more rigidly defined. For instance, female same-sex friendships have been viewed as naturally more intimate in comparison to male bonding. Consequently, Kit and Helena argued that it was more natural for women to be or become bisexuals:

> This is a debate really in the gay community: can there really be a truly bisexual male? I think there are but I think girls are much more able and fluid, likely to be bisexual or can be, because of that fluidity. (Kit, African American, lesbian, 19)

> A lot of bisexuals are women, who are more free anyway. (Helena, Caucasian, lesbian, 44)

Their essentialized view on female sexuality as inherently more fluid and on female bonding as naturally more intimate overlooks the social construction of gender and gender difference. It also neglects that patriarchy and heterosexism has further stigmatized and tabooed male bisexuality.

The bisexual-chic discourse also implies that bisexuality is a phase. However, it is a transitional stage leading to different conclusions; female bisexuality denotes an

experimentation stage for adventurous *straight* women, while male bisexuality signifies confusion and a denial phase for *gay* men. Various participants explicated that even within the communities, it was commonly assumed that "bisexual women are waiting to be straight and bisexual men are waiting to be gay."

When discussing the invisibility of bisexual men in mass media, Shirley simply claimed, "I don't think they exist. If you ask any gay male…if he is bisexual, he hasn't come out yet." Many other participants articulated the debate concerning if male bisexuality truly existed as a legitimate separate identity parallel to homosexuality and heterosexuality, or a denial phase for closeted gay men:

> If you read gay magazines even. A large [part] of the gay population considers bisexual men as gay men who are not comfortable with their homosexuality. There is a divide in the community that whether that bisexual men are bisexual or bisexual men are gay men who haven't arrived at being able to accept himself as being gay. That's the discourse in the gay community, that whether it's a separate identity in itself. And a lot of gay people are not comfortable with that, with that concept of a separate identity. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

As Kathleen Bennett (1992) defines, biphobia is "the denigration of bisexuality as a valid life choice" (p. 207). The very manifestation of biphobia is the denial of the very existence of bisexual people that results from the oppressive binary thinking through which the world is divided into mutually exclusive and opposite categories of self/other, intellect/emotion, male/female, masculinity/femininity and hetero/homosexuality. In fact, the word "bisexual" itself also acknowledges the binary cultural system, likely resulting in a discursive effect framing various misconceptions. As Ruth Gibian (1992) pointes out, "Bi is two, implying a split, two parts and no whole" (p. 5). Consequently, if bisexuality

can be viewed as a valid identity, it is understood as a half-and-half identity in public imagination. Its existence permanently and simultaneously pertains to both homosexuality and heterosexuality. And due to the half-and-half composite, bisexuals could not be content with only one gender, but need satisfaction from both genders at all time. Therefore, they are inherently promiscuous and disloyal, and "do not have the capacity to fall in love with one person" (*Times*, "New Bisexuals" 1974, May 13, quoted in Garber, p. 19). The promiscuous stigma is further worsened by the AIDS epidemic; bisexual people have been seen as the disease spreaders who brought the virus from the gay community and contaminated the heterosexual society:

> Bisexuality freaks people out and they don't know what to do about it. My gym teacher in 6th or 7th grade…told us during class that "Bisexual people are the people that you really need to be careful about because they are the people who are transmitting HIV to straight people. (Bette, Caucasian, lesbian, 29)

When interpreting the Amstel Light commercial which celebrates bisexuality in its tagline "having the best of both worlds," Max associated the promiscuous bisexual stereotype to the racialized "Down-low" stigma of African American men who kept a secret sexual life with other men, but in their heterosexual relationships, became disease spreaders:

> If you read the literature on bisexuality, that's the stereotypical view, who are trying to appreciate the most out of sexuality that they can…Right now, the highest demographic under the impact of AIDS was black women. And a lot of the problem was these black men who have male lovers on the side…the reason why black women are suffering from it, it was because of bisexuality. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

Max's stereotyping argument not only is biphobic but also based on racism that black men were viewed as deceitful predators, without recognizing the dreadful homophobia in African American community.

Max's various accounts denouncing bisexuality and transgenderism illustrated the continuing prevalence of biphobia and transphobia, despite the politically correct use of GLBT within the community. Stepping out of a failed heterosexual marriage, Max came out to himself as gay and had extensively read and researched homosexuality, as he frequently mentioned media reports and magazine articles on gay rights agenda and gay adverting trends. Yet, Max's strong Christian beliefs greatly impacted his aversion to bisexual and transgender people as he viewed bisexuals as promiscuous libertines:

> When a person is born gay, he is gay. But a person being a bisexual, it just means that they are being exceedingly promiscuous. And that's not ok…you are doing something based on fun, not based on purpose. And if you are doing something based on your desire, well, then if god doesn't pay attention that day, then he designs you differently. But when you are doing something for the sake of enjoyment, then you are going outside of the framework….The concept of bisexuality is something I struggled with. I was married and now I am self-identified as a gay man….If I am gay, I am gay, and it means the past years didn't work. But if I am bisexual, how does it affect the relationship and the way I was raised? If I am gay, well, god was not paying attention that day. But if I am bisexual, my natural boundary just was not formed properly. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

Additionally, Max's essentialist view of gender and sexuality, which was likely based on his Christian faith and internalized homophobia, formed his belief of homosexuality to be an inherent trait. Bisexual people who are often perceived as having the sexual freedom to "choose" contradicted his essentialist views.

> I think a lot straight persons think being gay or the gay lifestyle is a choice and I don't think it's a choice, I've actually seen this talked about in *Real World.*…there is a gay girl…her [straight] friend said, "You gay people really confused us. One time you dated a guy and now you are with a girl. It's like you choose." And the answer back was, "We don't choose who we are attracted to. What we are choosing is whether we'd go along with what the society tells us what we should be versus how we really feel." And having done that myself, that can be very confusing to somebody who is straight and who doesn't have the concept of being attracted to the same sex...I think bisexuality makes straight people think sexuality becomes a choice. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

Most participants were aware of the prevalence of biphobia through which bisexual people are denied the legitimacy of their sexuality and are stigmatized as deceptive, promiscuous fence-sitters. Most of them were sympathetic yet remained uncritical. The hegemonic sexual dichotomy and essentialist perspective on sexuality was reinforced by their assmilationist statements.

Although bisexuality in popular culture is often constructed within the framework of freedom, fluidity, and trendiness, its boundary-crossing often translates into threats and deviation. Bisexual people in lived experiences are often silenced, belittled, distrusted, and discriminated against. More importantly, the root of biphobia, the oppressive binary thinking, often formed a hierarchical order between the two mutually exclusive poles, as in the cultural constructions of male/female, gay/straight, and white/nonwhite, while the hierarchical order is used by the privileged of the pair to maintain the impermeability of boundaries. Reinforcing biphobia only leads to the perpetuation of homophobia and heterosexism and to the disunion of sexual minorities.

**Transphobia**

Similar to biphobia, domination based on identity and dichotomy has created transphobia in both mainstream society and gay and lesbian communities. Feminist scholars have extensively theorized about the social construction of gender and gender difference, starting from infancy when the first question of "a boy or a girl" is raised. It dictates everything in life and permeates every aspect of culture. The hegemonic gender dichotomy constructed male and female as mutually exclusive "opposite" categories with essentialized boundaries. Through gender socialization, the process of learning how to be a man or a woman, differences between male and female are exaggerated and reproduced to maintain a clear distinction between the two groups. The binary gender system also dictates a hierarchical order through which male is constructed as inherently different and superior than female. It is through the essentialization of gender difference that the hierarchical order can be maintained.

Orlando (1991) explains that "when one aspect of a culture gains particular prominence or importance, people feel an even stronger need to fit into such a scheme and will become uneasy in the face of ambiguities and "The 'disorder' resulting from central features of our lives which we cannot fit into dichotomies disturbs us deeply" (p. 227). Therefore, with binary thinking that is often essentialized and taken-for-granted, many people feel profoundly uncomfortable with those whose sexual orientations or gender identities are not easily discernible or defy conventional labeling.

Transgender or transsexual persons who cross the impermeable line, blur the fixed boundaries, or question the exclusiveness of the gender categories are viewed as threatening gender outlaws and are subject to denial of existence that is no different from the enforced invisibility of bisexuals. Brandon, a female-to-male transgender participant, described the hostility towards transgender people within the communities:

> The transgender/transsexuals are still…finding tolerance….There is still a lack of tolerance. For example, there have been issues that lesbians and bisexuals think that people choosing to transition from female to male…choosing some easy way out or copying out to stereotypical gender roles….Butch lesbians feel threatened by trans men….If they ever think it's an easy way out, they don't know what transsexuals have to go through…even after transition, there still are a lot of issues that you need to face, like confidentiality, insecurity issues, body issues. Not just like I am becoming a man so I can live with the straight mainstream society. That's not the case at all. Even in the gay male community, I have some friends who transitioned from female to male and they identified as gay. And it's hard for them to find partners especially if they are attracted to other gay males. As soon the gay male finds out that this person is transsexual, they completed dismiss him. It's just another discrimination because they still view that trans guy as a female. It's not fair to him because he just wants to live as a man and be attracted to other men. (Brandon, Asian American, transgender man, 22)

Also similar to biphobia that conceptualizes bisexual people as distrustful and disloyal, many transgender people were viewed as deceitful, as Brandon and Kit pointed out,

> As I feel, the straight society sees transsexuals, they see we are trying to fool people, fool the general public. (Brandon, Asian American, transgender man, 22)

> I have heard a number of people joke about "Check the Adam's Apple..." I know straight men definitely are afraid of being deceived by trans women. My friends are like, "You have to be careful. They can be a guy…in Austin especially, you have to be careful." They are afraid that they will be attracted to transsexuals and that would turn them into somehow queer. They are very insecure. (Kit, African American, lesbian, 19)

Yet, different from bisexual people, it has been debated if transgender people should be included in the community, as some have argued that trans*gender* people's experience and identity are entirely separate and different from the experience and identity of *sexual* minorities. When discussing the increasingly used acronym GLBT in the communities, which is considered as less controversial than the terms "queer" or "lesbigay" and is more comprehensive than gay or homosexual, Troy noted the transphobia denying the idea of transgender to be part of the community:

> I actually have heard people say that "We don't want them to be part of the community because I have nothing in common with the transsexuals. Their gender identity issues and my sexual orientation issues are not at all related." And my response to that is, maybe they are not related, but we are talking about human rights. We are talking about everyone being treated fairly and has the same rights, not making laws so that people can be discriminated against and based on their identity, being harassed, or being killed. (Troy, Caucasian, gay, 30)

Although Troy was sympathetic with the further oppressed transgender population, he nonetheless agreed with his friend that gender and sexuality were unrelated and that homosexuality is a matter of sexuality while transgenderism pertains to gender only. However, the reality that many effeminate gay men and butch lesbians are harassed and discriminated against not only because of their sexual orientation but also because their perceived unconventional gender performance provides evidence of a highly intertwined connection between gender and sexuality. In a related vein, the social construction of heterosexuality also dictates gender conformity as the traditional gender roles include male attraction to females and vice versa, resulting in numerous fallacies such as the

misconception that gay men are not real men but are narcissistic and neurotic or just men who want to be women.

In fact, the assmilationist normalization or heterosexualization of gay images directly highlights the gendered sexuality. Gender is always sexualized and sexuality is always gendered; the ambiguity and boundary-crossing within each category creates tension and anxiety. Yet, transgender people appear to pose the biggest threats, as they cross multiple boundaries through their transition. For example, previously self-identified as a butch lesbian, through his transition, Brandon now self-identified as a straight man. Some others radically refused to identify with either male or female and either gay or straight, such as Pat who self-identified as gender-queer.

Transphobia within the communities also reflects many gay men, lesbian, and bisexual people's insecurity and internalized homophobia. Fear of victimization is often acted out through aversion and rejection of those within one's group who are perceived as even more deviant than oneself (Ochs 1996). Many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are anxious that the further marginalized transgender population would bring an even worse image than the already marginalized image to mainstream society and thereby inhibit their efforts toward social acceptance, as Troy pointed out:

> I think a lot of gay people…feel, if we just don't have these transsexual people, we can be better off. (Troy, Caucasian, gay, 30)

Max, who previously voiced biphobic arguments that were framed in an essentialized binary worldview, also found the existence of transgender people contradictory to his Christian beliefs, as he explicated in his discussion of the Goodwill commercial:

> Personally…I am not very comfortable with gender bending. And I should be, but I am not…the whole GLBT, it's supposed to be all inclusive. You know, we are different, they are different, and we are all different together…I find it very hard to make sense. It may sound very backwards but I always say, God makes you a woman, you should die a woman. God makes you a man, you should die a man. If you like being with other men, that's fine. If you like being with other women, that's fine. But to change your body in the way like that, it's not something I am very open to. Most of us can accept…God create you gay and you are gay. That's ok. I think most people can agree to that framework. But to go beyond that, to say, a woman in a man's body or a man in a woman's body…I don't understand it. It's just too far against most conservative people raised in Christian community can accept. If you are a woman and you like another woman and god makes you that way, okay, they can accept that. But to be able to accept that you were made one way and there was a mistake somewhere alone the way, that's much harder to accept. That's why there is this whole discourse in…Christian movement over homosexuality…if homosexual was a person born with homosexuality or there was a mistake made in the upbringing…as long as you believe there is a mistake in the upbringing that makes homosexuality, then it's ok not to accept homosexuality. If you arrive at the point where, a lot have, that a person if born gay…because the way the whole Christian framework is built upon, then it's god's will and you have to accept it. You may say, "I don't like it. I disapprove." but you have to accept it's the way that person is made…by God. (Max, Caucasian, gay, 27)

Thinking from both the mainstream and conservative Christian perspectives, Max was clearly apprehensive about the negative impacts on social perceptions of the gay and lesbian communities, due to the inclusion of transgender people. Max's discussion also indicates that the lettering of GLBT only signifies the increased awareness of the transgender community and political correctness, instead of true acceptance. In fact, the normalization agenda in assimilationist gay rights discourse often results in further

marginalization of bisexual and especially transgender individuals. Sylvia Rae Rivera, a transgender activist and veteran of the Stonewall Riots, points out that drag culture and transgender rights have been erased from the mainstream gay rights agenda (Bronski 2002).

The erasure of transgenderism can be demonstrated by many participants' ignorance and unfamiliarity with the transgender community. Much of their limited knowledge of transgenderism was based on sensationalized media portrayals of male-to-female transgender people. Accordingly, while the number of people transitioning from male-to-female or from female-to-male is rather equal these days, many participants perceived that there exist more trans women than trans men:

> I think trans men are the most invisible, not as nearly as frequently as trans women. I guess, if you would do it in number, there are more men that feel like they are women than women that feel like they are men. That's just my guess because of how little is out there. (Helena, Caucasian, lesbian, 44)

When explaining the invisibility of trans men in mass media, Jack noted the varied cultural construction of femininity and masculinity:

> Femininity is more defined by appearance and performance and masculinity is coded as natural and innate, not need of explanation, it is being what it is, nothing needs to be explored. (Jack, Caucasian, gay, 35)

Shirley further analyzed the media's exploration with the racially coded and gendered media depictions of transgender people:

> It's all white, and it's all MTF [male-to-female]…Women's images, are more softener, warmer, so maybe more accepted…when men choose to become women, it's probably becoming weaker, non-threatening…but when women become men, it's not acceptable. A man turning into a woman, it's just get people's attention. (Shirley, African American, lesbian, 43)

It is important to note that although the two female-to-male transgender and one gender-queer participant were surprised to see the relatively neutral representation of transgender people in the Goodwill commercial, they appeared to be indifferent. They explained that it always was the highly femininized trans women who were shown in media for shocking effect or surprising twists, and the Goodwill commercial was no exception. It appeared that transgenderism was too much of a grave agenda associated to their lived experience of discrimination and stigmatization to be a subject explored in a humorous manner.

The struggle over hierarchical oppression between minorities groups is illuminated through the compliance of transphobia in the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities. Transgender along with bisexual people have become the scapegoats for hindering the advance of gay civil rights movement. The binary thinking that produced hierarchical oppression maintains its hegemony by redirecting aggression and blame back to the minority's own group and toward other minorities.

**Chapter Summary**

With increasing gay visibility and the cultural trends of queer-chic, queerness has been made-over or made-better. The new fashionable stereotype has partly replaced the stigmatized stereotype; gay difference has been redefined to taste literacy and transformed into cultural commodities that both gay and straight can consume. The radical change becomes a double-edged sword. Commodified queerness has provided economic opportunities for gay entrepreneurs and has penetrated straight consumers' living rooms and shopping carts. At the same time, its radical potential has been filtered out and only the dominant ideologies have been perpetuated.

Unlike gay window advertising texts, out-of-closet commercials that present out gay characters, same-sex sensuality, and pro-gay rights agenda provide clear identification points for GLBT audiences, while various identity factors, power relations, political stance, and social and cultural contexts come into play when reading gay-explicit texts. In participants' dominant readings, the normalized gay-affirmative representations brought them a much needed sense of empowerment and validation, even gratification and superiority for some, reflecting a strong aspiration for social acceptance. Participants' negotiated readings further illuminated the contested definition of "positive representation." Participants actively maneuvered the text codes, rationalizing or ignoring the problematic aspects without questioning the ideological underpinning. In particular, flawed GLBT representations were frequently tolerated or accepted through the emphasized political implications of raising awareness and increasing visibility, reflecting the social-political dimension of the text-reader relationship. In additional to

the shared sexual and gender minority identity, participants' middle-class social positions appeared to be a unifying factor structuring their readings. It was participants' stance on supporting assimilationist gay rights or radical queer politics that emerged as a dividing factor, framing their attitudes towards the development of gay marketing and their reading of out-of-closet commercials.

As demonstrated by the complexity in participants' discussion of out-of-closet commercials, analysis of minority representations has to go beyond the concerns of the stereotype and the positive representation, as both of them oversimplify the dynamic power relations between and within the dominant and the oppressed. From invisibility and the closet of connotation to enthroned consumer culture elites, queer representation continues to be contested, redefined, exoticized, and simultaneously normalized.

Aspiration for normalization and assimilation emerged as an overarching theme in many participants' readings of gay-explicit texts. The debate over "normalized" "positive representations" illuminates the power struggle within minority groups that divides GLBT people who seek the acceptance and privilege that hegemonic heteronormativity and masculinity/femininity bestow.

Scholars have pointed out that the development of the gay market is closely linked to an assimilation project of integrating gay and lesbians into the American mass market (Clark 2000; Chasin 2000; Sender 2004). The political implications of heightened consumer subjectivity are intertwined with political activism, consumption-oriented liberalism, and American citizenship. Consumer choices become "vote with

your dollar", and the marketplace is politicized as a battlefield over gay rights with tagged brand allies and brand enemies.

Historian D'Emilio (1993) indicates that the development of capitalism in the nineteenth century created economic opportunities and material conditions outside of the confines of heterosexual nuclear families and made the emergence of modern gay identity possible. Capitalism has continued to influence the cultural construction of gayness through the development of the gay niche market. Gay identity becomes a commodity to be produced and reproduced, and to be consumed and desired. Yet, the capacity to participate in the celebration of gay dollars has increasingly segmented GLBT communities, reminding us that the queer confrontationist/gay assimilationist split is also a class division.

Through the conflicted discourses of assimilation and confrontation, the ways in which sexual and gender dichotomies and identity politics are conjoined in contemporary culture can be illuminated. While gayness has been gentrified and lesbianism has been exoticized, bisexuality and transgenderism remain vulnerable to the violence of symbolic annihilation. Biphobia and transphobia, endorsed within the mainstream gay rights movement through the scapegoating of bisexual and transgender people for curbing social acceptance of gays and lesbians, illuminate the struggle over hierarchical oppression, and more importantly, the limited liberation and equality that assimilationist gay rights politics could ever deliver.

# CHAPTER VII

## CONCLUSION

The two-layer analysis presented in this dissertation—a textual and audience reception analysis of gay-themed mainstream television commercials—sheds light on questions concerning how GLBT consumers interact with gay advertising and gay marketing in the United States. Grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework of consumer culture theory, cultural studies, and critical studies perspectives, the research contributes to our current understanding of how corporate America and mainstream culture represent queerness and how a queer-identified audience/consumer reads these representations. With the scarcity of in-depth analyses on gay male, lesbian, and especially bisexual and transgender representations in advertising, and of the GLBT audience/consumer in general, this dissertation research constitutes an early step to understanding how gender and sexual minorities relate, evaluate, and negotiate their own images in mainstream media and in marketing communications.

This dissertation extends the literature on the role of the gay advertising and marketing discourses in the construction of a made-over gay identity (Chasin 2000; Sender2001; Bronski 1984; Gross 2001) and brings insight to the ongoing cultural debates regarding GLBT stereotypes and positive representation and contestation of assimilation or confrontation (Sender 2004; Clark 2000). It also adds new angles to the study of sexuality, gender, race and class through the perspectives of bisexuality and transgenderism to bring the taken-for-granted cultural system of binary thinking into

question. To be more specific, the analysis of normalized, heterosexualized, and gentrified queer representations contributes to our understanding of how advertising texts work to predispose audiences' reading positions. The audience reception study of GLBT audiences' dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings illuminate how audiences dynamically invoke complicated and sometimes contradictory identity factors and social, cultural, and political frameworks to make sense of gay advertising texts.

**The Dialectic Relationship between Gay Advertising Texts and GLBT Consumers**

The analysis of ninety-eight gay-themed television commercials, including thirty-four gay window and sixty-four gay-explicit commercials, and the transcripts of thirty interviews illuminates that GLBT consumers' relationship with gay advertising is often conflicted and ambivalent. I observed from my ideological textual analysis that gay-themed advertising was heavily concentrated in the product categories of luxurious automobile, fashion, alcohol, travel, and financial services which in turn defined a lifestyle and consumption-oriented gay identity and gay culture. The dominant gay habitus revealed in my participants' interpretive narratives reflected such marketing construction of gay identity. More importantly, gay advertising was found to be an influential cultural institution shaping the dominant gay habitus embodied through the high-end, trendy, and cultured gay male tastes.

The heavy sexualization of GLBT images in gay advertising which worked to commodify queerness was another key theme emerged in my textual analysis. This criticism was echoed by many participants as they pointed out that queerness in

mainstream advertising was often used as a sales pitch, a novelty, or a surprising twist, for entertainment or shock values. The emphasis and over-representation of perfect gay male physique, the attractive femme lesbians, sexually adventurous bisexual women, and the sensationalized hyper-feminine transgender women in advertising was found to be unrealistic and exploitive.

Furthermore, I argued in my textual analysis that the invisibility of the further marginalized butch lesbians, bisexual men, transgender men, and queer people of color, demonstrates the non-confrontational appeal in advertising, which was appreciated by my participants for the non-threatening portrayal and assimilationist message. GLBT audiences thus negotiate the flawed representation within a broader social and political framework, reflecting their own personal interests, experiences, and identity factors.

The assimilationist ideologies encoded within gay advertising texts that were analyzed in my textual analysis and the strong assimilationist theme that emerged in the interviews provide the grounds to assert that the development of gay consumer culture is an assimilationist construction. The consumption-oriented dominant gay habitus that is cultivated and promoted by gay advertising discourse is enacted and reproduced in gay consumer culture. In this way, gay taste has redefined gayness, and gay identity has become a commodity to be consumed.

The general observation is that most participants welcomed the development of gay marketing and advertising. They critically evaluated the text images for stereotypical or positive representations but did not evaluate the capitalist construction of gay niche market or the class-dividing implication of the dream consumer stereotype. In fact, the

shared middle-class position or aspiration emerged as another crucial unifying factor over race, gender, age, and religion in their attitudes toward gay advertising and gay marketing in general. Yet, the awareness of being a social minority outside of the mainstream society permeated their readings of gay advertising text codes, which can be illustrated by their complicated reading process that involved constant speculation of conservative heterosexual audiences' responses.

Moving beyond the over-simplified questions of "do you want to see GLBT people presented in advertising?" or "will you support gay-friendly business?" asked in most gay consumer surveys, GLBT audiences' responses to gay advertising provide a rich picture of the tensions that are taking place in defining gayness in the United States. Participants' dissimilar and sometimes self-contradictory meaning-makings reflected their varied self-perception and definition of queer culture and echoed the radical queer/assimilationist gay rights debates in the global context.

All participants were aware of the development of gay advertising and gay marketing in the United States, mostly through observing an increased amount of advertising in major gay publications and marketers' sponsorships of local GLBT events. Some expressed strong emotional responses and formed a deeper engagement with the texts by carefully decoding gay window texts or evaluating the political implications. Some others critiqued the flawed depictions, the reinforced stereotypes, and the underlying capitalist ideologies. Despite their divergent readings, they all perceived advertising as a mighty cultural institution in the capitalist American society. Thus,

advertising becomes a legitimate discourse for participants to contest their own situation in the GLBT community and in the American society at large.

One of the main patterns emerging from the interviews reveals that the GLBT audience uses mainstream media texts, including gay advertising, to gauge "what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender." Gay window commercials were viewed as compatible with the history of queer invisibility and understood in relation to their closeted experience. Some participants hence perceived this conservative strategy as an index of hostility of political climate. Yet it is important to note that some participants' insider gay reading of gay window commercials generated an obvious sense of affirmation, gratification, and self-empowerment which was often ignored in audience studies which mostly focused on the resistant or oppositional readings when addressing audience subjectivity. Many participants also argued that only GLBT audiences with queer subcultural capital and gaydar sensibility would be able to pick up the subtle cues in gay window advertising. Therefore, GLBT audiences' gay reading defines the symbolic boundaries of a queer interpretive community, differentiating them from other heterosexual audiences. Discussing gay window ads and informing or persuading others of a gay reading also functions to negotiate in-group status as a way of showing who is in the know.

In terms of reading Out-of-closet commercials that offer clearly recognizable GLBT images, the advertising texts were interpreted in a comparative framework of "what we really are" and "how we are seen by the mainstream society." Normalized gay representations were considered as realistic, reflecting a self-perception of "just like

everyone else." Gay stereotypes, such as feminine gay men, were regarded to be the unrepresentative but typical image in the eyes of the dominant group. Additionally, the explicitly GLBT-themed commercials were viewed as a direct and convenient index of the gay-friendliness of the brands advertised, which were read as brand allies.

From the perspective of reception studies, a more nuanced understanding of the GLBT audience demonstrates that GLBT individuals' relationships with advertising are constructed in the midst of many other struggles, such as the battle for visibility and positive representation, for equal rights, and the fight against racism, sexism, class bias, and oppressive gender and sexual dichotomy. In each of these fields of struggles (Bourdieu 1993), they use different strategies and capitals (cultural, economic, social, symbolic) to find sources of empowerment. The question that remains is what the role of gay advertising is in helping or inhibiting those fields of struggles.

GLBT representations in gay advertising as well as the gay consumer market are cultural spaces for the contestation and reproduction of gay difference and sameness along with ideologies of gender, race, and class. Therefore, queer representations and queer audience reception has to be evaluated considering the class division, race dynamics, gender conflicts, and other identity politics. It is important to emphasize here that symbolic annihilation of butch lesbian, bisexual men, and transgender people in gay advertising texts and internalized homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in certain participants' interpretive narratives call for critical attention to the political dimension of the everyday consumption of advertising texts.

In the interview, participants talked about gay advertising far beyond the product information and brand image. The media talk about gay window commercials which made the ambiguous Volkswagen ad so widely known in GLBT communities illustrates that advertising is often consumed outside of the conventional viewing context and for non-purchase based, socially oriented reasons. GLBT representations in advertising and in other forms of mass media, such as films, news, and TV shows, are often used as a central conversational resource by GLBT audiences. Gay window texts are integrated into GLBT audiences' social lives and are discussed and enjoyed for strengthening communal ties and maintaining communal boundaries. The capacity to decode gay window texts is translated into cultural capital in order to negotiate social capital, such that viewers with stronger gaydar often educate the less sensitive viewers as to "what is so gay about it." The social use of advertising thus indicates the significant phatic role of these mass-communicated ad meanings in the lives of its audiences.

More importantly, participants' interpretations of gay advertising texts illustrated the often ignored political dimension of consuming advertising. While marketers often claim that their gay advertising strategy is just about business, not politics, GLBT consumers' political use and engagement with gay advertising texts suggest the opposite. The gay consumer culture appears to be highly politicized as politically-informed readings, such as participants' acceptance of an ad's meaning based on reasons of "raising awareness," "contributing to visibility," and "changing mainstream, perceptions." As can be seen in participants' discussion of gay-explicit commercials, advertising text is often socially contextualized and its role in negotiating social positions

is often recognized. To some GLBT audiences, to be included in mainstream advertising carries far more significant political meaning than being included in films or television shows because advertising is often perceived as an official sanction from the Corporate America. To be "approved" by marketers was viewed as a key progress of the gay rights movement and was found directly relevant to participants' experience in the workplace, in attaining financial independence, and in their consumption activities.

It is important to note that many participants considered their consumer rights to be a crucial part of citizen rights. Some argued that being included in a mass market meant that they have been recognized as a crucial segment of the American economy, which was an important part of how they defined themselves as American citizens. Having believed in free-market system and the associated market democracy in the United States, some participants also argued that exercising their economic power through consumption would effectively lead to market reform and social changes. Consequently, many participants advocated consumerist activism as a indirect form of gay rights activism through which their gay dollars was transformed into gay votes in the marketplace. The important thing is not to question whether GLBT consumers would really base their everyday consumption practices on political reasons or to what degree or how frequently, but to understand how the intertwined constructs of economic citizenship, consumerism, market democracy, American identity, and capitalism come into play when connecting modern gay identity to consumer identity and citizen identity.

The perceived difference between participants' self-image and GLBT portrayals in advertising emerged as an important factor diversifying participants' dominant,

negotiated, and oppositional readings. Some gay and lesbian participants appeared to be less invested in bisexuality- and transgender-themed commercials. A few non-white participants held indifferent attitudes to the development of white-dominated gay advertising, and some female participants criticized the male-dominated gay advertising strategy in relation to gender bias in workplace that results in varied economic status. Participants' narratives thus accentuated the continuous tension within the heterogeneous GLBT communities.

With all the ambivalence, GLBT consumers are inclined to think that gay advertising, with all its flaws, has pushed mainstream culture gently and slowly in a positive direction towards social acceptance. Through a detailed qualitative audience research, this dissertation has critically questioned this optimistic vision of social acceptance that assimilationist gay advertising discourse seems to suggest. However, the problems generated by gay advertising's skewed definition of queerness cannot all be laid upon marketers' shoulders. As Sender (2004) reports, the group of professional homosexuals, including gay entrepreneurs and gay marketing professionals, has actively promoted the white male upper-middle class dream consumer stereotype. It is important to point out that the gay consumer culture is not a market segment imposed upon unwitting or unwilling GLBT people, but a collective action aiming to incorporate one's minority identity into dominant social practices and hence into American citizen identity.

At last, I would like to discuss the theoretical implications of the two main conclusions of this dissertation. First, assimilationist ideologies are found to dominate both gay advertising space and GLBT consumers' interpretive narratives. In their

readings of gay advertising texts, participants uncharacteristically articulated a preference for normalized, and in a way, heterosexualized gay and lesbian images mirroring their self-perception of "just like everyone else." Second, the construction of gay consumer culture is politics-laden where consumer choice resembles political activity and consumer identity overlaps with American citizenship. For some members of a social minority, especially for those who are economically privileged, consumer choices and marketplace might be bestowed far more political significance and made explicitly intertwined with citizenship since the realm of consumption might function as the few key platforms for exercising individual freedom and fulfilling self-achievement.

Participants' contested meaning-making of gay advertising and paradoxical employment of gay difference and sameness suggests dynamic and dialectic power relations at work. Foucault's (1990) theorization of power and how power circulates through institutions and subjects provide a useful framework for understanding these negotiation mechanisms. Foucault's idea of power rejects the oversimplified notion that power is only processed by the dominant group and is repressive in nature. Instead, he argues power is dispersed, indeterminate, and productive. Power is something which can be used and deployed by particular people in specific situations. And more importantly, he argues power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.

Foucault's (1990) perspective of power provides a more holistic approach to the construction of queerness and GLBT identity in multilayered contexts, and highlights sexual and gender minorities' agency and resistance, rather than simply delineating the

contours of heterosexist oppressions. We can then understand the complex ways that sexual and gender minorities are caught up in power relations between the dominant heterosexual society, the class of homosexual professionals, and radical queer criticism. In particular, special attention should be paid to the issue of "difference" between power positions in terms of social class, age, sexuality, and ethnicity as well as in different socio-cultural contexts to further illuminate the diversity of gay men, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people's lives and their agency.

While the dominant culture tends to capitalize on queer difference either through discrimination or commodification of queer-chic otherness, gay rights discourse counters with an assimilationist approach in order to minimize the constructed difference. While the dominant gay rights discourse is implicated with identity politics based on binary thinking, radical queer voices never cease to remind us of a broader vision of social change. Through analyzing the interplay of various agents in the construction of gay consumer culture, we can come to understand the protean quality of power relations and the possibility of resistance.

**A Note to Marketers**

In the conclusion of her book *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*, Chasin (2000) calls for a vision of queer socialism so that "a more just and equitable political and economic arrangement would unyoke rights from property, so that dollars are not a requirement for participation in the processes by which social decisions are made" (p. 240). The model of social marketing with emphases on the objective of

social change, the understanding of target consumers' experiences and perceptions, and the building of a trustworthy and satisfying relationship with target consumers can suggest better directions to GLBT marketing and advertising.

Much gay advertising continues to show marketers' superficial understanding and even misconceptions of their GLBT consumers. For instance, the idealized and sexualized male body has found to be offensive and hurtful to gay male consumers' self-esteems and body images. Furthermore, the focus on the white gay male image has alienated many other GLBT consumers, resulting in skepticism and distrust. In contrast, social marketers have long been working with the GLBT communities through AIDS prevention campaigns. Mainstream marketers, gay or straight, can gain valuable insights from social marketing campaigns, especially through a deeper understanding of GLBT consumers' concerns, interests, life goals and political agenda. This would allow marketers to forge a stronger relationship through not only advertising but through sponsorship and contribution to causes that are important to the community's well-being, in order to win GLBT consumers' trust and supports.

Additionally, while most marketing commentaries suggest that gay window advertising is the safest and hence, the best way to target gay consumers, the effectiveness of gay window advertising for brand recognition and recall appears to be highly questionable as I observed that many participants were heavily invested in decoding the gay subtexts and paid little attention to the product advertised. More problematically, this conservative strategy can be interpreted as "closeted," opportunistic, and exploitive by many GLBT consumers. In fact, many GLBT consumers are likely to

be skeptical towards advertising. Therefore, advertisers should consider going beyond advertising, but also include community engagement and relationship marketing. More importantly, as demonstrated in this dissertation, the gay consumer culture is highly politicized, marketers should position their brands as "brand allies" through practicing and publicizing GLBT-friendly employment policies to show their support and commitment to the GLBT communities in order to win GLBT consumers' long-term trust and loyalty.

**Reflexivity on the Role of Researcher**

Before proceeding to present suggestions for future research, it is necessary to reflect on my role as a researcher in the study. I can safely say that the interview experience with most of my participants was cordial and highly informative. No matter if they were interested in advertising and popular culture or not, many of them enjoyed talking about media including criticizing advertising. Because most participants belong to the same middle-class social position as me, I cannot be sure how class has impacted our interview conversation, except that they may have taken the middle-class viewpoint even more rightly.

However, my academic background in advertising appeared to have influenced a few participants' perception of the interview study. Some of them seemed to frame the interview context in a way that was similar to a marketing consumer survey, even though I made it clear in the introduction that it was not. This was particularly noticeable among the few participants who argued that they adored advertising for its entertaining values

and creativity. For instance, after I introduced myself as a doctoral student in Advertising, Christine responded by claiming "I wanted to be an advertising major [in college]!" and explained how she would rewind the television programming to see a particular commercial again. Participants like Christine also tended to actively express their support or loyalty to the brands advertised in gay advertising.

However, I was also aware of the politically-framed motivation of certain respondents. Influenced by the recent defeat of the anti-gay marriage legislation in November 2005, some participants who otherwise argued that they did not watch much television or were not interested in advertising and popular culture were more motivated to participate in GLBT-related studies. They also were more likely to stress the political implication of gay marketing and emphasized the significance of consumerist activism.

Will's political motivation to participate in GLBT-related studies was especially clear, and became part of his endeavor to fight against the invisibility of bisexuality within the community. All of the interviews were held at coffee houses that participants suggested or places that I knew that were gay-friendly and with both indoor and outdoor seating. It was a freezing January evening when I met Will for the interview. Therefore, the coffee house was somewhat crowded inside. Despite the low temperature, Will chose to stay outside. From the beginning, he appeared slightly nervous and uneasy and constantly watched out for others who walked by our table. During the interview, he also took noticeably more time to ponder the questions with a few long pauses. He was especially uncomfortable when talking about his experience of coming out as a bisexual man. It was obvious to me that he struggled with his bisexual identity and biphobia in

both mainstream society and within queer communities. To end oppression, he emphasized the significance of political activism, especially lobbying and election voting, to achieve social acceptance. He also explained that he has been actively participating in the GLBT community at the university so that he could "bring my agenda of bisexuality and make it a stronger voice in the UT community", which was what motivated him to participate in my study.

About one-third of the interviewees were my acquaintances or friends and two-third were participants who I met for the first time. I consider my position in most of the non-acquaintance interviews as a "friendly stranger", and yet, sometimes I suspected if I appeared too friendly, or more correctly, too "mainstream." Although in the introduction, I used the relatively inclusive term "queer" to present myself as a queer-identified researcher (which actually signified my beliefs in radical queer politics), some participants nonetheless assumed that I belonged to the mainstream group of gender-normative gays and lesbians and that I expressed explicit criticism of the gender-nonconforming representations of feminine gay men and butch lesbians as well as nakedly biphobic and transphobic statements.

In particular, in Max's interview when I first encountered such strong aversion to bisexual and transgender people, which was truly disturbing to me, there were moments when I was uncertain about how to react, especially when his "personal opinion" was intimately intertwined with his Christian faith. Yet, after more probing questions, what first appeared to be Christian beliefs revealed the fundamental assumption of essentialized binary thinking that Max had embraced to validate and defend his own gay

identity. Fearing stigmatization of bisexuality, the only way to explain his past heterosexual relationship and his same-sex desire is to argue for inherent homosexuality to differentiate his gay identity from bisexuals who exist “for the sake of enjoyment.” Max’s biphobia and transphobia were parts of his internalized homophobia, reflecting his struggle with his own sexuality when growing up in a conservative Christian community. However, my silence in response to Max’s problematic arguments also reflected my gender socialization within Asian culture so that I did feel uneasy to outright confront others’ opinions.

Max’s case made me rethink the controversial neutral role of a researcher. Having acknowledged that absolute neutrality is not possible or desirable in qualitative research as the research quality relies on the trust and close interactions between a researcher and interview participants, I have endeavored to maintain a neutral position which I believed to be crucial for allowing participants to freely speak their minds and to speak in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. Yet, participants’ overwhelmingly assimilationist view concerned me, especially when I later realized that some of them may have never been exposed to alternative criticisms, including the viewpoint of radical queer politics. I then began to play devil's advocate to counter some participant’s overly celebratory view of normalization and assimilationist gay rights politics. We debated about whether to limit or exclude flamboyant drag queens and outrageous Dykes on Bikes in various gay pride parades as examples of excluding other members in the community for assimilation. We also discussed the problematically ignored racism and sexism in major gay rights organizations. During our discussions, participants came to be

more aware of the dilemma over normalization and exclusion. A few participants emailed me back after the interview to ask for queer-related information sources other than the glossy major gay and lesbian magazines, as they felt we had discussed some "new ideas" that had never occurred to them before.

Their responses also reminded me of the relationship between research and activism. Some feminist scholars argue that feminist scholarship is inherently linked to action as "feminism represents a repudiation of the status quo" (Reinharz 1992, p. 175). Change-oriented research with the objectives of empowering, liberating, and assisting disenfranchised groups of people has been truly inspiring and motivating to me, especially when facing the sporadic moments of nihilism in academia. I consider my dissertation research as the first step towards action, as demystification and obtaining knowledge creates the potential for social change, especially when the lack of understanding of the stigmatized often aggravates and perpetuates their vulnerability. Yet, I aspire to stride further towards action research in the future.

The academic background (doctoral students in the liberal fields of film studies, art history, and literary criticism) of a few participants who advocated the anti-assimilationist queer politics, in contrast to most participants' demand of assimilation, also made me reflect on my social prestige as an academic researcher. Accommodationist as it may seem, some participants' aspiration of assimilation reflects their life-long struggle with everyday discrimination, their burnt out radical energy, and the fundamental need to survive. Hence, power differentials of social positions and privileges that are evoked in the researcher-participant interaction needs to be carefully examined in

research, in action research especially, in order to avoid projecting the researcher's egocentric vision onto the participants.

**Future Research**

Although this dissertation did not directly investigate the subject of GLBT identity formation, my participants' various coming-out stories and experiences can provide theoretical implications to identity theory. Classical identity theory often assumes an end stage of identity formation, which is a commitment to a specific identity after a period of exploration. However, although my participants were committed to a specific GLBT or queer identity, the maintenance and redefining that specific identity appeared to be an on-going process, or even a life-long project. One of my lesbian participants even invented a whole new system of identity label, from gay-plus, gay-minus, bi-plus, bi-minus, to straight to redefine the complex and fluid human sexuality. Additionally, with internalized homophobia, the exploration and struggling stage, which is often theorized in classical identity theory as the status prior to the identity achievement stage, is often concurrent with the identity achievement status for many GLBT people, suggesting the complexity and unstable nature of identity.

A more extensive ethnography exploring consumers' consumption activities and brand relationships that extends beyond the gay male subject is imperative. Little research attention has focused on lesbian, bisexual, and transgender consumers' consumption practices which would better our understanding of the protean quality of consumer identity and consumer strategy. Additionally, the relationship between habitus

and fields was not fully explored in this research. However, it is an important subject for future research in order to understand how GLBT individuals negotiate with the larger social structure and how this negotiation affects their consumption and evaluation of queer-conscious and GLBT-themed media texts. A longitudinal ethnographic research using prolonged engagement and participant observation would help to advance our understanding the production and reproduction of a dominant gay habitus and its impacts on GLBT consumers' consumption activities.

As elements of the GLBT culture has been increasingly integrated into the mainstream and more straight people have become affiliated with the GLBT communities, heterosexual audiences' potential queer readings of the ambiguous gay window advertising would shed insights on the social construction of gaydar and queer subcultural capital as well as the nature of interpretive communities. Additionally, while I demonstrate in this dissertation that many participants' interpretations of gay advertising were often based on an essentialized dichotomy of gay/straight, GLBT audiences' perception of the "homogenous" mainstream calls for more research attention. Studies exploring GLBT people's construction of homosexuality in relation to their self-identities would shed insight on the social construction of homosexuality as well as heterosexuality.

In Jhally and Lewis' (1992) study of audiences' reception of *The Cosby Show*, they found out that the show's positive representation of successful African Americans was so effective, that it distorted white America's perceptions about African-American progress. It allowed white audiences to prove "anyone can make it" and to be satisfied about race relations. But the most dangerous aspect lies within white audiences' illiberal

conclusion that the only way to explain the failure of most people, or those who could not achieve what the Huxtables have achieved, was intrinsic laziness or stupidity. The inability to recognize the role of class in sustaining racial inequalities leads to insidious racism while "White America could look at the Huxtables, watch a black family, and not feel guilty" (p. 94).

The trendy wealthy gay dream consumer stereotype similarly might have created a misconception that "the gays have made it," allowing the heterosexual mainstream to ignore the prevalence and severity of homophobia. In fact, marketing commentaries arguing that gay men and lesbians are "Coming Out to Shop" (Barr 2004) imply that gays and lesbians finally have become affluent enough to come out of their closet to be part of the mass market. In this perspective, economic impoverishment, instead of homophobia, becomes the major barrier keeping gays and lesbians in the closet. The capitalized *superior* gay tastes and conspicuous consumption of high-end commodities also might lead some heterosexual consumers to perceive that the gay people's double-income-no-kids lifestyle is even more luxurious than the American average. In this way, gays have not only made it, but overachieved. As I noted in Chapter VI, the gay dream consumer stereotype has been utilized by some to argue against including sexual orientation in anti-discrimination legislation. Therefore, an audience reception study that examines heterosexual consumers' meaning-making of the affluent, stylish, and normalized gay representations in advertising texts would shed insights into the role of mainstream media in challenging or perpetuating long-standing stereotypes and stigmatization.

The findings of this dissertation have the potential to inform our understanding of minority audience, mass media consumption, and consumer culture in general. The theoretical implications of this dissertation may be transferable to other social minorities in a similar context, especially the minority groups that also face the struggles of stereotype/positive representation and assimilation/confrontation, such as the development of Latino market since the 1980s with the highly contested cultural meaning of being a Latino/Latina in the United States.

The tension between GLBT images and respondent's evaluations of these portrayals reveals that the gay advertising and gay consumer market can be conceptualized as a field of power relations competing to define what it means to be GLBT. In addition to GLBT consumers, other agents in the field, including marketers, gay-specialty advertising agencies and marketing research firms, the publication industry, and gay rights organizations all should be included in the study of gay consumer culture. It is especially imperative for future research to address the relations between marketers, ad agencies, and consumers in order to achieve a more holistic understanding of the manifold dynamics in the construction of a gay niche market. From the perspective of the audience, GLBT consumers of the lower social class or working class are likely to have a radically different relationship with gay marketing and advertising and would shed insights contrasting most participants' middle-class worldviews in this dissertation.

At last, the globalization of capitalism and the globalization of queer culture constitute another key framework of understanding gay consumer culture. The conceptions of sexuality in cultures have begun to influence the meaning of "queer"

while scholars have argued that queerness as a commodity *exported* from the United States to other cultures can lead to the homogenization of queerness that defies local variability. Altman (1983) in his book *The Homosexualization of America, the Americanization of the Homosexual* argues that the globalization of a gay identity is universal and suggests the influential role of American gay culture in informing queer cultures around the world. Yet, the significant impacts of the varied vectors of hierarchy, social, cultural, and historical contexts on the configuration of sexuality, as well as on the development of gay consumer culture in other cultures, remains to be explored. As queer cultures are likely to transcend boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, and generations indicate the need for additional research to understand the full cross-cultural implications of a subculture of consumption. It is important to understand how queer subcultural capital can be transferred and acquired across boundaries and cultural commodities that signify queerness are used, altered, or reinterpreted when embedded in a nonnative culture with dissimilar cultural backgrounds and principles.

## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The following set of open-ended questions is used as a general guideline to structure the interview conversations. The interviews flows in a direction that is consonant with participants' particular interests and experience. Thus, the order of the questions does not necessarily reflect the order in the real interviews.

Background Questions

1. Please introduce yourself. Where are you from? Tell me something about your family, the communities you grow up with? Your profession or your major?
2. How do you identify with the GLBTQ community? Can you tell me about your coming out experience?
3. How long have you lived in Austin? How do you like it here? Do you feel you fit in the local GLBT community?
4. What is your first and favorite gay movie? TV shows? GLBT celebrities? Why?
5. Do you think there is any change in the GLBT images on mass media, in terms of quantity and quality? Can you give me some specific examples?

Gay Advertising Reading Questions:

1. Do you like/enjoy this ad? Why?
2. How do you interpret the images or the relationship between the characters? Why? How do you feel about the implied gay subtexts?
3. Do you identify with the images? Why? Do you find to relevant to your experience or to the concerns of the community?
4. What do you think this commercial is trying to say? Does it speak to you? Does it say anything about GLBT people? About the movement? About our role in the society?
5. Do you think the ad image is similar or different from other images in mass media? How does it compare to the general perception?
6. How do you feel about the gay window or gay-explicit strategy? And the gay market?
7. Have you read anything about the gay market? Did you talk about gay commercials or gay-friendly brands among your friends? How does it affect your life?

## APPENDIX B: GAY ADVERTISING SAMPLE

| Brand | GLBT | Format | Year | Product Category |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jolt Cola | B | Out | 2000 | Non-Alcoholic Beverages |
| Amstel Light | B | Out | 2002 | Alcoholic |
| Orbitz (Miami) | B | Out | 2003 | Travel |
| Sims | G | Out | 2001 | Computers/Software |
| Uncle Ben's | G | Out | 2002 | Food |
| Giggo.com | G | Out | 2000 | Website |
| Subaru (Shadow) | G | Out | 2005 | Automotive |
| IKEA | G | Out | 1997 | Furniture |
| Nike Ric Muñoz | G | Out | 1995 | Sport shoes |
| Snapple | G | Out | 2003 | Non-Alcoholic Beverages |
| Virgin Cola | G | Out | 1998 | Non-Alcoholic Beverages |
| Smint | G | Out | 1996 | Gum |
| Daily Soup | G | Out | 1999 | Food |
| Domino's | G | Out | 2005 | Restaurant |
| Flooz.com | G | Out | 2000 | Website |
| Philadelphia | G | Out | 2005 | Travel |
| Heineken (superhero) | G | Out | 2005 | Alcoholic |
| L'oreal (Kyan) | G | Out | 2005 | Personal Product |
| Levi's | G | Out | 1998 | Fashion/Apparel |
| McCormick Grill Mates | G | Out | 2001 | Food |
| Orbitz (new boyfriend) | G | Out | 2005 | Travel |
| Pier 1 (Thom) | G | Out | 2004 | Furniture |
| Pier 1 (Thom) 2 | G | Out | 2004 | Furniture |
| Pilot Pens | G | Out | 2001 | Miscellaneous |
| Herbal Essences | G | Out | 2001 | Personal Product |
| Reebok | G | Out | 2001 | Sport shoes |
| Miller Lite (Switch) | G | Out | 2001 | Alcoholic |
| T-Mobile (couple talk free) | G | Out | 2004 | Telecommunications |
| Subaru (Opposite Attraction) | GL | Out | 2005 | Automotive |
| Subaru (Different Roads) | GL | Out | 2005 | Automotive |
| Clothestime | L | Out | 1996 | Fashion/Apparel |
| John Hancock Financial Services | L | Out | 2000 | Financial Service |
| Mistic | L | Out | 1996 | Non-Alcoholic Beverages |
| American Express | L | Out | 2005 | Financial Service |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sims 2 | L | Out | 2004 | Computers/Software |
| Jack in the Box | L | Out | 1999 | Restaurant |
| Chevron Corp. (diversity) | mixed | Out | 2000 | Energy |
| Heineken | mixed | Out | 2001 | Alcoholic |
| Jean-Paul Gaultier | mixed | Out | 2000 | Fashion/Apparel |
| John Hancock (class of 75) | mixed | Out | 2001 | Financial Service |
| Touch/Lynx | mixed | Out | 2005 | Personal Product |
| 1-800-contacts | T (drag) | Out | 2005 | Personal Product |
| Orbitz (Coco) | T (drag) | Out | 2004 | Travel |
| Focus Contacts | T (MTF) | Out | 1996 | Personal Product |
| Samuel Adams | T (MTF) | Out | 2001 | Alcoholic |
| Diet Dr Pepper | T (MTF) | Out | 2000 | Non-Alcoholic Beverages |
| Clothestime | T (MTF) | Out | 1996 | Fashion/Apparel |
| E*TRADE | T (MTF) | Out | 2002 | Financial Service |
| Braun | T (MTF) | Out | 1997 | Personal Product |
| Goodwill | T (MTF) | Out | 1996 | Retail |
| DiGiorno | T (MTF) | Out | 2003 | Food |
| MySimon.com | T (MTF) | Out | 1999 | Website |
| Holiday Inn | T (MTF) | Out | 1997 | Hotel |
| Pete's Wicked Ale | T (MTF) | Out | 1995 | Alcoholic |
| Virgin Cola | T (MTF) | Out | 1995 | Non-Alcoholic Beverages |
| Nissan kiss | G | Vague | 2003 | Automotive |
| Chili's Esera Tuaolo | G | Vague | 2003 | Restaurant |
| Dr Pepper (dog walker) | G | Vague | 2001 | Non-Alcoholic Beverages |
| Baileys Irish Cream (thief) | G | Vague | 2002 | Alcoholic |
| Baileys Irish Cream (kiss) | G | Vague | 2002 | Alcoholic |
| Honda (facepaint) | G | Vague | 2002 | Automotive |
| Nissan (shift) | G | Vague | 2003 | Automotive |
| Doritos (Enrique Iglesias) | G | Vague | 2003 | Food |
| Diet Pepsi | G | Vague | 2005 | Non-Alcoholic Beverages |
| T-Mobile (son) | G | Vague | 2005 | Telecommunications |
| Klondike | G | Vague | 2000 | Food |
| Volkswagen (wink) | G | Vague | 1997 | Automotive |
| Bissell | G | Vague | 2000 | Appliance |
| Minute Maid (Popey) | G | Vague | 2001 | Non-Alcoholic Beverages |
| Subaru (Radar) | G | Vague | 2003 | Automotive |
| Brawny | G | Vague | 2004 | Household Products |
| Kmart | G | Vague | 1991 | Retail |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dockers | G | Vague | 1995 | Fashion/Apparel |
| Moet & Chandon | G | Vague | 1997 | Alcoholic |
| Head & Shoulders | G | Vague | 2001 | Personal Product |
| Toasted Oatmeal cereal | G | Vague | 1997 | Food |
| Toyota Corolla | G | Vague | 2005 | Automotive |
| Toyota | G | Vague | 1999 | Automotive |
| Volkswagen (chair) | G | Vague | 1997 | Automotive |
| Volkswagen Jetta | G | Vague | 2002 | Automotive |
| Volkswagen (Rummage Sale) | G | Vague | 2002 | Automotive |
| ampm convenience stores | G | Vague | 2000 | Retail |
| Levi's (Laundrette) | G | Vague | 1985 | Fashion/Apparel |
| Benetton (Jenny) | L | Vague | 1995 | Fashion/Apparel |
| Subaru (What do we know) | L | Vague | 2000 | Automotive |
| Kmart | L | Vague | 1996 | Retail |
| National City Bank | L | Vague | 2003 | Financial Service |
| Zyrtec | L | Vague | 2002 | Pharmaceuticals |
| Lee | L | Vague | 2005 | Fashion/Apparel |
| Wachovia (beach) | L | Vague | 2001 | Financial Service |
| Yoplait | L | Vague | 2006 | Food |
| Gap | mixed | Vague | 1999 | Fashion/Apparel |

**APPENDIX C: GAY-THEMED COMMERCIALS USED IN RESPONDENT INTERVIEWS**

| Brand | GLBT | Format | Year | Description |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Clothestime | L | Out | 1996 | In a ladies' room at a bar, a sexy woman checks out another attractive woman. |
| http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=67 | | | | |
| John Hancock Financial | L | Out | 2000 | A lesbian couple adopts an Asian baby. |
| http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=216 | | | | |
| IKEA | G | Out | 1994 | A gay male couple shops for dinning room table together. |
| http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=76 | | | | |
| Samuel Adams | T | Out | 2001 | A sexy woman confesses that she used to be a man. |
| http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=773 | | | | |
| Virgin Cola | G | Out | 1998 | A gay male couple is being married by a female priest. |
| http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=118 | | | | |
| Levis | G | Out | 1998 | A nerdy young man talks about his conversation with his dad. |
| http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=92 | | | | |
| Jolt Cola | B | Out | 2000 | A young woman fantasizes about her boyfriend morphing into a sexy woman. |
| http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=191 | | | | |
| Goodwill | T | Out | 1996 | An unseen character picks up manly stuff to give away to Goodwill and turns out to be a transsexual woman. |
| http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=59 | | | | |
| Amstel Lite | B | Out | 2002 | An attractive blonde woman is hit on by both of her male and female friends. |
| http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=1065 | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Orbitz | B | Out | 2003 | A man checks out another man from his hotel balcony. |

http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=1202

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Giggle.com | G | Out | 2000 | A young man comes out to his father. |

http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=190

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Herbal Essence | G | Vague | 2001 | A woman rushes past several sexy bellboys up to a hotel concierge desk and asks if the man behind the counter is the concierge. |

http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=792

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bissel | G | Vague | 2002 | A tough-looking biker turns out to be the benevolent mother of his bike club. |

http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=912

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Subaru | L | Vague | 2000 | Several famous female athletes, including Martina Navratilova, talk about car performance. |

http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=159

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Zyrtec | L | Vague | 2002 | Two average-looking women talk about their shared allergy symptoms. |

http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=1016

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kmart | L | Vague | 1996 | Rosie O'Donnell and Penny Marshall talk about a tennis bracelet on sale at Kmart. |

http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=40

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wachovia | L | Vague | 2001 | Two average-looking women walk alone the beach when talking about their future plans. |

http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=684

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Volkswagen | G | Vague | 1997 | Two hip-looking you men are driving around aimless when they find a smelly couch. |

http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=43

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Toasted Oatmeal cereal | G | Vague | 1997 | Two men talk about breakfast cereal in a kitchen. |

http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=42

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